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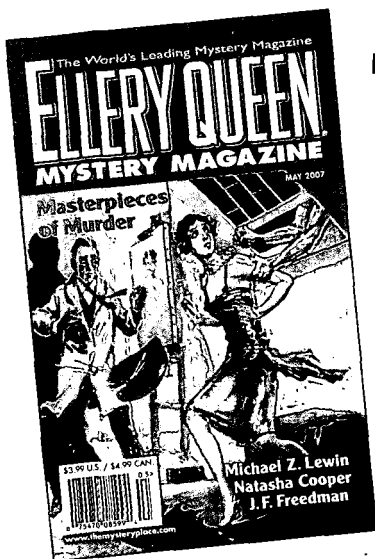


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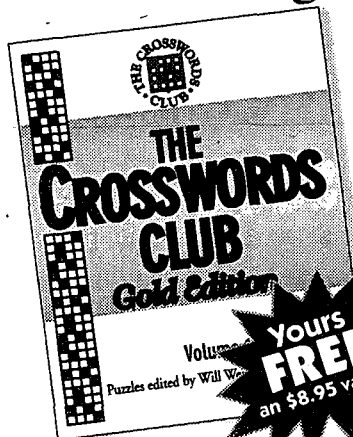
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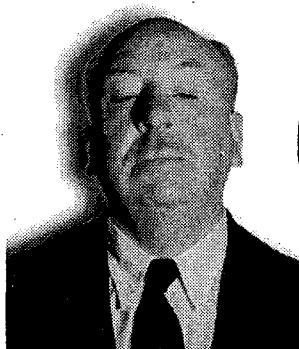
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

FAREWELL TO A MASTER

It was with deep sadness that we learned of the death of Edward D. Hoch on January 17, 2008, at his home in Rochester, New York. He was 77 years old. At the time of his death Mr. Hoch had published nearly a thousand short stories. He began his publishing career in 1955 with "Village of the Dead," which appeared in *Famous Detective Stories*. His first AHMM story, "Twilight Thunder," appeared in the January 1962 issue. Since then he has published another 104 stories in our pages, with one more to come (look for "Baja" in our September 2008 issue). This prolific author also had a story in every issue of our sister publication, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, going back to May 1973. His many awards included an Edgar for Best Short Story for "The Oblong Room" (*The Saint*, July 1967). The Mystery Writers of America presented him with the Grand Master Award in 2001 for his body of work and contribution to the field. Mr. Hoch established a number of series characters over the course of his writing career, such as the clever thief Nick Velvet, and he continued to flex his creativity with new ones. At AHMM we're proud to have published the first Annie Sears story, "The Cactus Killer" (October 2005). But in addition to being a prolific writer of excellent mystery stories, Mr. Hoch was also a warm and gracious man who was friendly and encouraging to new writers—as well as new editors.

"The Latin Beat" is Loren D. Estleman's twentieth story for AHMM—his first in our pages appeared thirty years ago, in the August 1977 issue ("The Tree on Execution Hill"). This issue's story features the Four Horsemen, WWII-era Detroit policemen who constitute the Racket Squad; they first appeared in Mr. Estleman's 1998 novel *Jitterbug*.

As always, we strive to bring a wide variety of settings and styles to our lineup of stories each month, and in this issue we traverse the globe. Mithran Somasundrum ("On Soi Arab," May 2005) returns with another romp through Bangkok with Vijay, a translator who takes on private detection work when business is slow. Marianne Wilski Strong takes us to Ancient Greece, where a devastating plague is sapping Athens, and yet despite the bad times, its citizens can still muster the energy for murder. A widow tries to make sense of the murder of a kid in the bleak streets of Vladivostok in post-Soviet Russia in Mike Wiecek's story

continued on page 21

THE LATIN BEAT

A FOUR HORSEMEN STORY

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

“Egg-zayvier Coo-got,” said Lieutenant Zagreb.

“Egg-zayvier Coo-got,” repeated Sergeant Canal.

Zagreb nodded. “‘Cause if you pronounce it the way they do down in South America, no one will know who you’re talking about.”

Canal shook his kettle-sized head. “I’ll never understand this country, and I was born here.”

“I thought you were Polish.”

“Ukrainian. Don’t make that mistake around another Ukrainian; they’re not all as reasonable as me. I never spoke a word of English till I was five, and I spent the next five learning it good. Now you say I got to speak Spanish like some Corktown mick to make myself clear.”

“Congratulations. You’re a citizen.”

“Go to hell, you Balkan bastard.”

Xavier Cugat and his Orchestra were performing One Night Only at the Graystone Ballroom, a wartime benefit. It was an opportunity for the Detroit Racket Squad to round up illegal aliens waiting to get in, turn them over to Immigration, and reduce the potential for riots in the beergardens downtown when soldiers on leave got a snootful and started demanding to see the draft card of anyone with a low hairline and an accent—specifically, anyone who pronounced “Xavier Cugat” correctly. The press took a dim view of jailing America’s fighting men, and regarded any sort of foreigner as a saboteur in the making.

“Preemptive strike,” Zagreb said. “Like the League of Nations should’ve done to Hitler at Munich. Crack open a zooter’s head tonight and save two of ours next Saturday.”

Canal said, “We sure don’t have any to spare. O’Connor got called up today. That’s three this week.”

“O’Connor’s feet are flatter than skilletts. This keeps up we’ll be letting out space downstairs.”

“What’d the commissioner say about this idea of yours?”



"There's some things he likes not to know about till they make the *Free Press* front page."

"So if one goes sour he can bust us down to Stationary Traffic."

"We can always enlist."

"Not me. I might be shooting at a relative. And they don't make a helmet big enough for your head."

Zagreb raised and resettled his hat, as if such comments upset him. He was thirty pounds lighter than Canal, but from his eyebrows up and from temple to temple his head was as large as the sergeant's. His fine fair hair scarcely covered it, and he had as much hair as he'd started with. Some subordinates, when they thought he was out of earshot, called him Donovan, after an episode of the radio program *Suspense* called "Donovan's Brain."

Officers McReary and Burke came in and straddled a couple of straight-back chairs. McReary pushed back his hat to show the freckles that spattered his bald, twenty-three-year-old scalp. Burke, older than any of them but with no ambition to make sergeant, was dark and simian, with hairy paws pushing out of his cuffs. All wore blue suits and gray snap-brims, the uniform of the unit. It helped to distinguish friend from foe when the blackjacks came out.

Zagreb looked at his Wittnauer. "Guess you boys forgot about daylight saving time. We were beginning to think you joined the Navy."

"Streetcar broke down on Washington," said McReary. "Everything's starting to go to hell and you can't get parts."

The squad room at 1300 Beaubien, police headquarters, was deserted but for them; desks and chairs stood empty and rows of typewriters slumbered under rubberized covers, awaiting the return of their masters from England and the Philippines. These four men made up the Racket Squad, or what was left of it until the Second World War was won. Five months after Pearl Harbor, with the Allies stalled on both fronts, they weren't expecting reinforcements anytime soon.

Each of them was of an age and in good enough condition to pass a military physical, but they all had draft deferments on the grounds of essential service. The *Detroit News*, *Times*, and *Free Press* called them the Four Horsemen. The *Herald*, an opposition sheet, called them a disgrace.

The department had been promising them a new car since before the war, but with the automobile industry now devoted exclusively to military equipment, they were stuck indefinitely with a 1940 Chrysler Royal four-door sedan, black, with its head-

lamps painted black except for narrow slits to conform during air-raid drills. Swivel spotlights mounted on both sides were designed to turn night into day. The car was tortoise shaped and resembled the tanks Chrysler was building in Warren. Burke, who did most of the driving, was determined to force a replacement and stripped the gears whenever possible.

"What've you got against this heap?" Zagreb asked, bracing himself against the dash. "It's got more horsepower than the state fair, and you couldn't dent it with a baseball bat."

"It's uglier'n my wife's rear end. I'm hoping for a Zephyr."

"If you mess this one up we'll be lucky to get an Edison electric."

Burke double-parked next to a five-year-old DeSoto with tiger-striped upholstery ("Mexican pimpmobile," he snarled), and he and Zagreb shared from a pack of Chesterfields while Canal lit one of his four-for-a-quarter cigars. Three windows rolled down in unison. They were waiting for the crowd in front of the Graystone to increase. Inside, Cugat's orchestra or its warm-up band was rehearsing, the brass and marimbas audible for a block.

"Donkey music," Burke said. "I like Wayne King. Nobody ever brawled to a waltz."

"You always were a moldy fig," Canal struck the beat with his big hands on the back of Zagreb's seat.

McReary said, "Irish tenors for me. What about you, Zag?"

"I got a tin ear."

"Right now I'd trade you that Zephyr for it." Burke ground his teeth.

The lieutenant was having trouble getting his Ronson to light; he'd misplaced his good Zippo. McReary passed him a book of matches from the Cozy Corner Grill. He didn't smoke, but he'd started carrying a supply to offer Zagreb. Unlike Burke, he didn't want to retire a lowly officer and knew promotion had little to do with merit.

Canal stopped thumping to crack his window and dump ash. "You ought to get hep, Burksy. There's a lot of white faces out there among the coffee-and-cream."

In fact, the Hispanic youths in the zoot suits—baggy slacks, knee-length coats, two-foot keychains, and sailbrim hats with feathers in the bands—were outnumbered, along with their dates in bright Spanish colors, by Caucasian couples, dressed more conservatively in last year's fashions, making do to save material for uniforms, parachutes, and bandages. It was a chilly night in early May and they seemed content to huddle in the press of bodies, chattering and laughing in anticipation of the entertainment that awaited them inside.

With so many native-born bandleaders absent, in uniform or performing with the USO, Latin music had swept the country. Cugat was king, conducting with baton in one hand and his pet Chihuahua in the other, but Carmen Miranda, Noro Morales, and that smoldering young Cuban conga drummer Desi Arnaz were topping the bill in places where a dozen years earlier they might have been busing tables.

The craze had its detractors, of course; mainly in places like Los Angeles, too close for comfort to the Mexican border for many, and Detroit, where the mix of Negro and white southern defense workers was already volatile before Hispanics had begun joining them in swarms. The same sort of person who'd held that ragtime and jazz undermined society warned that hot blood and spicy music led to anarchy. It saw the home front threatened from within as well as without.

The crowd spilled out from under the canopy, across the sidewalk, and into Woodward Avenue. A big traffic cop, still in his double-breasted winter wool, walked along the gutter pointing at stragglers with his billy to clear the automobile lanes. Passing the big Chrysler, he glanced briefly at Zagreb through the windshield. The lieutenant nodded and poked his cigarette butt out through the window. "Break out the candy, Mac."

As McReary hoisted a black metal toolbox from the back floorboards onto his lap, Burke unhooked the microphone from the dash and radioed for backup. Just before sirens growled and the lubberly paddy wagon came waddling around the corner, the youngest of the Four Horsemen opened the box and passed around the blackjacks.

Asa Organdy had been assistant city editor at the *Detroit Herald* until someone in Accounting turned over a canceled check written on expenses and recognized the name of the proprietor of a Vernor Street brothel on the endorsement. After a brief investigation, Organdy was demoted to general assignment reporter and placed on probation. In his quest for redemption, he'd taken to dogging the Racket Squad with a photographer he called Speed, after the Speed Graphic camera the reporter was convinced the man slept with. Organdy knew the cop who'd given Lieutenant Zagreb the high sign, and had passed him a pint of Four Roses through the window of his chalky gray Plymouth coupe for the privilege of parking beside a hydrant twenty yards behind the black Chrysler. When the excitement started, the reporter and the photographer piled out.

Speed's favorite shot didn't make the paper until the second day. It showed the monolithic Sergeant Canal sapping a young Hispanic, caving in his hat. The man's face twisted in shock and pain.

Instead, the photo editor decorated the front page with the four plainclothesmen wading into the crowd in hot pursuit of everyone perceived to be in guilty flight. But that shot went to the morgue when Organdy obtained the names of those who'd been arrested and found one with a military record; the same man Canal had bludgeoned in Speed's photo of choice. After that, it ran every day for a week and went out on the AP wire.

Eduardo Natalo was on medical leave from the United States Marine Corps. He'd been aboard a troop transport ship headed for active duty in the Philippines when a Japanese Zero swept down and strafed the deck, killing a dozen men and wounding seven, including Private Natalo. With a bullet in his leg, he'd helped carry men more seriously injured to safety while the plane made a second pass, chopping up deck all around him. A citation written and signed by his commanding officer credited him with uncommon valor and recommended him for the Bronze Star; the Purple Heart was a foregone conclusion.

"He had a cane." Zagreb looked up from the newspaper he was reading in the echoing squad room. "Didn't you see it?"

Canal, standing in the center of the floor with feet spread and his fists at his sides, shook his head. "He turned, I guess to keep from falling down and getting trampled. He must've tripped over it. I thought he was ducking so I wouldn't see him. I didn't hit him as hard as it looks in the picture. He was falling already, away from the blackjack."

"You look like you're swinging for deep left field."

"How bad's it going to get?"

Zagreb folded the paper to an inside page and showed him a four-column cartoon of a bull-necked dick slugging a man in a uniform with a fist in a chain-mail glove. The soldier's chest was plastered with medals, and the dick wore a Hitler mustache.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." Canal crossed himself.

"It don't even make sense," Burke said. "The guy was fighting Japs, not Krauts."

"Yeah, like Popeye stands the test of truth." The lieutenant tossed the paper onto one of the many vacant desks. "The commissioner's on his way. It's been good working with you fellows. Maybe we'll meet up Over There."

Canal said, "It's no good you boys getting canned over me. I'll quit first. I can always pick up security work at the Rouge plant."

Burke cracked his hairy knuckles. "Witherspoon can't can any of us. Who's he got to put in our place?"

• "Who says I have to put in anyone?"

At the new voice, McReary, who wasn't long out of uniform, got up quickly, almost tipping over his chair. Zagreb and Burke remained seated. Police Commissioner John H. Witherspoon stood in the open door to the hallway, with his hands folded behind him. No one had ever seen him actually enter that room. He seemed smaller than he was, too small for the three-piece suit that had been tailored to his measure, too small for the building, too small for the responsibilities of his office. He parted his hair in the center and wore round-lensed Harold Lloyd spectacles.

"This squad was created to break up the Purple Gang," Witherspoon went on, his Adam's apple bobbing at each full stop. "The repeal of Prohibition achieved that. It's occurred to me that a prescription for a disease that no longer exists can be worse than the disease."

Zagreb said, "Sir, you're forgetting a little thing called the Black Market."

"An understandable omission, as I've seen no report of a single tire-smuggling operation smashed apart by your hand." The commissioner took a thick fold of newsprint from the side pocket of his coat. It fell open to the length of a child's letter to Santa. "This is a galley proof of an editorial that will appear in tomorrow's *Herald*. Corporal Natalo—his promotion just came through—was visiting friends in Detroit. He's an El Paso native. His friends call him Eddie. His family has lived in this country for three generations. How far back does yours go, Sergeant?"

"My father came through Ellis Island in ought-three."

"The editorial asks what right you have to conclude on the basis of a man's appearance that he is an illegal."

Zagreb struck twice at his lighter, failed to get a spark, and let his cigarette dangle. "I guess the same one you had to ask Louis Armstrong for a menu when he sat in at the Tuxedo Grill last year."

Color spotted Witherspoon's gray cheeks. "Sergeant, you're suspended without pay pending a hearing to discuss your dismissal from this department. The rest of you are on report." He folded and pocketed the sheet and turned to leave.

The lieutenant unsnapped the holster from his belt, tucked the flap of the folder containing his shield inside, leaned over in his chair, and slid revolver, holster, and shield across the floor. They stopped two feet short of Witherspoon's shoe.

"Pick it up!" the commissioner said. "It's city property."

"So's this." Burke leaned and slid side arm, holster, and shield behind Zagreb's. It fell an additional four inches short.

"Not enough body English," Zagreb said.

Canal stooped, put his badge and weapon on the floor, and kicked it with a toe. It passed Burke's but not the lieutenant's.

McReary's wound up closer to the commissioner's foot than all the rest. "Next time let's play for money," he said.

A tight smile curdled Witherspoon's face. "A picturesque gesture, but bootless. You men provide an essential service. You can't resign without the permission of the War Reserve Board."

Zagreb stood, took out his wallet, and went over to hand him a letter printed on rag paper with the War Department seal on the top. "Picked it up this morning," he said. "I used to go out with the director's secretary."

"This is extortion. You know the department can't spare four experienced men during wartime."

"We can't spare one. *Three* Horesemen? Forget it."

Witherspoon slapped the letter into Zagreb's palm. "Sergeant, you will apologize publicly to Corporal Natalo at the press conference this afternoon. Your rank depends on it."

"Sure."

"The rest of you will back him up."

"Sure," Zagreb said.

A crease appeared above the nosepiece of the spectacles. "It will be sincere."

"Natch. Anything for our boys in uniform."

The press conference took place on the front steps of Headquarters to accommodate the radio equipment and newsreel cameras. Witherspoon was present, with Mayor Jeffries and members of the legal firm that represented the city. Zagreb spoke last.

Asa Organdy pressed forward, with Speed popping his flashgun in the lieutenant's face. "What's crow taste like?"

"Kind of like chicken. How was the hooker?"

He knew the exchange would never reach the public.

A reporter from WXYZ Radio asked him why Eddie Natalo was being detained.

"For his own safety," interjected the commissioner. "There are some benighted individuals who wish him harm."

"Worse than what Canal did to him?" Organdy asked.

Canal lurched toward the man from the *Herald*. He was stopped by a blinding flash from Speed's camera and the rest of the racket squad, who gripped his arms.

The mayor cleared his baritone throat. "We are all Americans

since Pearl Harbor. Some of our citizens could do with enlightenment on that score."

Organdy said, "My paper would like to know if this administration thinks it can sweep an outrage like this under the rug just by having the man responsible mutter a few words in public."

A murmur rumbled through the reporters. Canal stirred; Zagreb and the others tightened their grip on his arms. He shook them off just by flexing.

"Hell," he said. "I'll tell the kid I'm sorry to his face."

Eddie Natalo was under guard in a luxury suite at the Book-Cadillac Hotel, all expenses paid by the City of Detroit. It was supposed to be a secure location, but a number of men in rough clothes were standing at the entrance. The placards some were holding ran to the "America for Americans" sentiment. The Chrysler was still rocking on its springs when Zagreb got out and placed a hand on the shoulder of a man whose forearms were furred with prison tattoos.

"When'd you get out, Ricky?"

"Last month. I served my stretch. I got a right to be here." He balled his fists at his sides.

"Not with this bunch. I drove two of 'em in the paddy when we busted up the Black Legion. What's your parole officer got to say about your hanging out with the Klan?"

By now the Four Horsemen stood shoulder to shoulder facing the group. It dispersed.

"No kidding, you were in on that?" Canal asked.

"I was pounding a beat on Belle Isle. But it stands to reason they'd send a delegation."

The officers guarding the entrance told Zagreb they were under instructions to let only Canal inside.

"There goes the manager's vote. Good luck, Sergeant."

"No sweat. If he wants to spit in my eye, I got it coming." Canal handed him his revolver.

The lieutenant stuck it under his belt and produced a pint of Old Grand-Dad from his hip pocket. "Never send a man into a dangerous situation unarmed. Remember that when you head up your own squad."

Canal grinned, slid the flat bottle into a side pocket, and pushed through the revolving door. The men in uniform closed ranks to keep out the reporters who'd followed from headquarters. One of the officers shoved Speed aside when he raised his camera.

Twenty minutes later a shot was heard upstairs.

At his own insistence—pride, probably—Corporal Natalo had only one guard at the door of his suite, a fellow marine in dress blues with a side arm in a white flap holster. He admitted he'd let Canal inside without searching him after the sergeant spread his coat to show the empty holster on his belt, although he'd challenged him on the bulge in his coat pocket and the sergeant had shown him the pint of whiskey. When he heard the shot, a sharp crack, the guard drew his pistol, kicked open the door, and threw down on Canal, who was standing over the dead man. Natalo lay on his back on the floor with a bullet in his forehead, fired at close range from a semiautomatic .25-caliber pistol found on the floor near the body; ballistics confirmed it. The marine held Canal until police arrived to take him into custody.

During interrogation at police headquarters, the sergeant said he'd apologized sincerely to Natalo, and when at length the man accepted, he took out the pint of Old Grand-Dad, and "got spifflicated with the boy." They'd hit it right off, he said, one fighting man to another. According to Canal, when Canal excused himself to use the john, Natalo had asked him to go for him as well; they were the last words the pair exchanged. When the sergeant finished and washed his hands, he came out to find the war hero dead and the pistol on the floor. It was tiny; he'd have thought it was one of those novelty cigarette lighters if it weren't for the corpse and the stink of spent powder. That was when the guard broke in.

Zagreb asked him why he didn't hear the shot.

"It must've been when I flushed the toilet. Them hotel jobs are loud."

"Pretty thin."

"I didn't do it, Zag."

The Homicide man, Powers, tagged in. He was one of Commissioner Witherspoon's boys, cleanly handsome with a hair trigger. "The pistol's untraceable. Someone gouged out the serial number. Just filing it off isn't enough to keep the boys in the lab from bringing it out."

"I know that."

"Sure you do, that's why you gouged it out. Everyone knows your kind of cop always carries a throwaway in his sock. Comes in handy when you shoot an unarmed man and you want to make it look like self-defense."

"I never did."

"Bull. The marine outside said he heard a lot of yelling. He drank your liquor, but you weren't friends. You blew your top and then you blew his."

"We got loud, yeah. We were drinking, swapping stories. If he says it was anything else he's a liar."

"You and the marines just don't get along, do you?"

"Go to hell."

Zagreb left them alone; he wanted to defend Canal and that was bad police work. The commissioner ambushed him in the hall. "He'll crack when we get the results from the carbon test. He can't claim he was on the firing range. The logs show he hasn't been in since yesterday."

Zagreb said, "It wouldn't show anything one way or the other. He said he washed his hands."

"That's why we took his shirt."

"That might not show anything either. A small gun like that might not blow back as far as the cuff."

"Well, we won't need it. The guard said he never left his post. No one else went into that room between Canal and himself."

"What do we know about the guard?"

Witherspoon shook his head. "You're barking up the wrong tree there. His father served with distinction in World War I. His older brother flew in China with Chennault; he was shot down by the Japanese. His younger brother died fighting in the Spanish Civil War. His own record's clean, before and after his enlistment. He ships out for the South Pacific next week."

"Did we test *him* for powder residue?"

"We did. Negative." The commissioner pursed his lips; he seemed to consider the expression sympathetic. "Any good cop wants to stand by his partner. Lord knows he's not the first member of this department to go bad."

"Go to hell."

"What?"

"I'm quoting Canal. That's what he told Powers. You're going to have to convict him without a confession."

Witherspoon glared but let the explanation stand. "We may not get the chance. I just heard from Washington. The War Department intends to claim jurisdiction. The penalty for murdering a soldier in time of war is execution."

"No one's been put to death in this state since 1830!"

"I'm sure that's the line Governor Kelly will take. In this climate he hasn't a prayer of stopping it."

A uniform approached carrying a sheet of paper. He wore bifocals and a hearing aid; the city was scouring the retirement rolls for personnel to fill the empty desks. Witherspoon took the sheet, read it, and handed it to Zagreb. Carbon tests on Canal's shirt had

discovered traces of spent gunpowder on the right cuff. He'd discharged a firearm while wearing it.

In the interrogation room, Canal read the report and smacked it down on the scarred table. He wore an old sweater Burke had given him to replace his shirt. Burke was the closest to him in size, but the sleeves were three inches too short and his shoulders strained the seams. "It's a mistake. I ain't fired a piece since yesterday."

Zagreb asked him when he's changed shirts last.

After a poleaxed moment, a grin spread across the sergeant's broad face. "Day before yesterday. I get three days out of 'em now before they go to the laundry. Our boys need the soap. This happened yesterday." He tapped the sheet.

"You just now thought of it." Powers showed his teeth.

"Ask Mrs. Chin. She says the war's putting her out of business."

"It won't prove anything. The tests don't show how long the powder's been there."

Zagreb picked up the report. "This is a lot of powder for that size gun. More like a police .38"

"They don't show caliber either."

"Get the murder weapon up here from ballistics."

Powers straightened to his full movie-star height. "You giving orders now? We're both lieutenants."

"When'd you make rank?"

"October 12, 1940."

"December 22, '39. Get your butt down there, *Lieutenant*, and don't use the stairs."

After Powers left, pulling the door shut hard behind him, Canal said, "It was November of '40. I was at your party."

"He's Witherspoon's man. He doesn't have the brains to check my file."

Powers returned and slammed the pistol on the table. It was less than four inches long from action to muzzle, nickel plated, and looked like a toy. "Pick it up," Zagreb told Canal.

"Don't get any hot ideas about shooting your way out," Powers said. "It isn't loaded."

Canal picked it up with his big paw. "You check it?"

The Homicide man blanched a shade.

Zagreb said, "Point it at Powers."

He did so. Powers, pale still, rested his hand on his empty holster. He'd forgotten that side arms were banned from interrogation.

"Pull the trigger," Zagreb said.

"I can't."

"Go ahead. It's empty. Ballistics always unloads after a test."

"I mean, I can't. Look."

Canal opened his hand. The two lieutenants leaned closer. The sergeant's finger was too thick to fit inside the trigger guard.

The marine's name was Norden, like the bombsight. He had a clean jawline, transparent blue eyes, and the standard short jar-head haircut. There wasn't so much as a loose thread on his beautiful blue uniform. His hands were well kept, the nails rounded and buffed lightly. He sat straight as a fence rail behind the window in the interrogation room Canal had just left.

Witherspoon turned from the window. All the Horsemen and Powers were present. "What about the left hand?" He eyed Canal.

"Same thing," Powers put in. "Maybe the pinky, but he wouldn't hit a man between the eyes at any range. I saw his score from yesterday. He barely qualified shooting the regular way."

Canal said, "I'm better up close."

"Shut up," said Zagreb. "You're fighting for your life, not your job."

Powers said, "He didn't do it, Commissioner. Why carry a gun you can't use?"

Zagreb tilted his head toward the window. "If Norden could hear voices inside the hotel room, he could hear when Canal went to the bathroom. That's when he made his move."

"But why?"

Burke said, "Let me have a crack at him, Commissioner."

"I'm afraid you mean that literally. Officer McReary?"

As the young man entered Interrogation, Burke nudged Zagreb. "Thinks he's a pussycat," he whispered.

"It's all those freckles."

They listened over the intercom. Norden shot to his feet.

"Sit down, soldier."

"Sir, yes, sir." He sat.

"Can that. I'm just a grunt and you know it."

Some of the tension went out of the marine's shoulders.

"How'd you get along with Eddie Natalo?"

"Pretty okay." He had a parade-ground tenor. "We didn't talk much. He was on one side of the door and I was on the other."

"How about Sergeant Canal?"

"We didn't talk at all. By the look of him we could use him to dig foxholes."

"Why didn't you search him for weapons?"

Color stained Norden's face. "That was a SNAFU. I was told he was coming to apologize. His holster was empty and I assumed

someone else had taken care of it. I accept responsibility for my part in what happened."

McReary had his hat off. He slid a hand over his prematurely bald head and rested it on top. He seemed unsure of his next move.

"Where are you from, soldier?"

"Litchfield, Minnesota. Population thirty-one hundred."

"Don't get many Hispanics up there, I bet."

"Corporal Natalo was the first I ever met."

"Too bad you didn't get to know him. Man like that, a hero, could've given you some tips about how to behave in combat."

"I got plenty of those in training."

"This early in the fighting, those drill sergeants can't have his experience. The military probably would have wasted him on a war bond drive."

"I guess he'd've made a good salesman. He didn't have an accent or anything."

"Accent?"

Norden's recruitment-poster features twisted. "You know. Like those Mexican bandits in Western movies."

McReary leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. "You're a middle son, right? Your older brother was killed in China, and your kid brother got it in Spain. Your dad was wounded at the Marne. I guess his boys made him proud."

"Jack did. He took out two Zeroes before they shot him down. Pop was just plain mad over Andy. His first day out, a Fascist sniper put one in his head from a tree two hundred yards away. He never had a chance."

"Fascist? One of Mussolini's thugs?"

"One of Franco's. Some lily-livered spick that couldn't even look him in the eye when he murdered him. Just like one of those *bandidos*." Norden's face was copper colored.

"Well, there are spicks and Hispanics, just like there are micks and Irish. Eddie Natalo was a credit to his ancestors. If Jack and Andy had come back, they'd have been proud to have their picture taken with him at a bond rally. Your pop too."

"He'd've spit in his face! Just like Andy would've done if that yellow guinea had come down out of his tree and faced him like a man. They're all the same. One of our boys got himself killed helping those men on the ship, and Natalo took the credit."

"Who told you that?"

"No one had to. Look what one of them did to my little brother."

McReary pushed himself away from the wall and unfolded his arms. "You're out of uniform, soldier."

Norden was gripping the edge of the table, his fingers white around the nails. He glanced down at his tunic.

"Where are your gloves?" McReary asked.

"**T**ell me about the gloves," Witherspoon said.

McReary said, "Yes, sir. A marine's not in full dress uniform without white cotton gloves. I took a hinge at the manual of arms when this thing started, to bone up. They had it at the recruitment center. I barely made it back out in civvies."

The Four Horsemen and the commissioner were in the squad room. Witherspoon was two feet inside the door, as far as he'd ever ventured, and Zagreb and Burke straddled chairs. McReary had risen when the commissioner came in, and Canal, back in suit, tie, and hat, sat on one haunch on a windowsill looking down on Beaubien. Lieutenant Powers was absent, supervising Norden's confession.

Zagreb held out a report rolled into a funnel for Witherspoon to take. "Scrub team found the gloves in a bin behind the Book-Cadillac. It looks like he took them off while everyone was crowding into the murder scene and stuffed them in the waste receptacle of a maid's cart. They test positive for spent powder. I told him his prints were on them."

"I didn't think you could lift prints off fabric." The commissioner studied the sheet.

"You can't."

"Ah." He folded it.

"It was premeditated," Zagreb said. "When Norden drew the guard detail, he bought the piece, or had it, intending to use it in place of his service automatic, which would've nailed him to the crime. Canal coming to apologize was an answer to a killer's prayers."

"How can a man hate a stranger enough to kill him?" asked Witherspoon.

"Ask the military. They trained him. We're going to have to beef up Homicide when this war's over."

When the commissioner left, Zagreb asked Canal why the long face? "You should be celebrating. Open that window and fire up one of those torpedoes you smoke."

The sergeant didn't move. "I liked Natalo," he said. "You drink with a man, it's the same as fighting with him; you find out what he's made of. I don't think I'll go out on the Latin beat next time, Zag. You can suspend me for insubordination if you want."

"Me, too," Burke said. "I don't like the music anyway."

Zagreb stuck a Chesterfield between his lips. "What about you, Mac?"

"I'll go if you order me, Lieutenant."

"Uh-huh." He snapped open the Ronson. "Let's find out where Ricky and the Klan went after we roused them from the Book Cadillac and bust heads." He spun the wheel and got a flame for the first time. 🦅

Editor's Notes, continued from page 5

"Soldiers." And a Mystery Classic by Leo Bruce, "I, Said the Sparrow," takes us to the British countryside.

Returning to this side of the globe, "Family Values" is a new investigation by Bubba Simms, Mitch Alderman's endearing Central Florida P.I., in "Family Values." Molly MacRae ("Fandango by Flashlight," December 2005) teams up with Stephen Johnston to write "Cookies," a culinary mystery with a pungent aftertaste. We have a new story from Will Ludwigsen; "In Search Of" shows just how much variety there is to the short story form—even for the fairly plot-driven crime genre. And new to us this month is Jodi Tamara Harrison, who brings us a story of the chain of events set off when a Native American boy reports seeing an infant in the river to his insightful grandmother.

Note to Our Readers:

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Going Underground?

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 140.

FAMILY VALUES

MITCH ALDERMAN

Bubba was driving his Bronco on Cypress Gardens Boulevard with the windows down, enjoying the perfect April afternoon in central Florida, when the car phone rang. He let it ring. This was too nice a day to ruin by talking to anyone. Traffic was thin, since most of the RVs belonging to the tourists had headed their way north at the end of spring baseball season. Retirees, most of whom had probably never ridden in a bus in their lives, now had a compulsion to drive one cross country. He had just mailed a bill to Arnie at State Insurance for a week's surveillance and there was money in his wallet. What, me work? was his thought. The phone stopped ringing. He smiled and the ringing began again. He quit smiling and answered the phone, "What?"

"It's Gilroy. Want to make a hundred for an hour's work?" It was Tommy Gilroy, partner with his brother of the biggest bail bond business in Polk County.

"I have no need for money today."

"So you already ate lunch, big deal, you'll be hungry tomorrow. I need a quick favor. Have you got your phony sign stuff and can you be at Combee Road and 92 in thirty minutes or less?"

"What's happening?"

"My brother's having a root canal. None of my helpers are in town, and I have a bond getting ready to run. I need you to draw them to the front door so he stays in the house until I can slip in the back and cuff him. A hundred bucks. An hour. No fuss, I promise."

"Okay, I'm on my way." It might be fun to do something physical after a week of watching a warehouse to catch the swing shift foreman loading his own truck.

Bubba increased the speed of the Bronco and changed lanes to catch the light at Highway 17 to take the back way across Winter Haven and Auburndale. He caught the light at Recker Highway and 92. In twenty-three minutes Bubba was at the edge of Lakeland proper and stopped beside Gilroy's Lexus in the shopping center parking lot. Tommy Gilroy stood by his front door as the Bronco rocked to a halt. He wore a black leather jacket and

had a pump shotgun propped on the passenger seat.

"Follow me. The trailer's off Old Combee," Tommy said as he climbed in his white Lexus. They headed north for ten minutes until Tommy turned left onto a two-lane blacktopped road. About fifty yards later, he stopped and got out of his car, walking back to the Bronco.

"He's lives at his mother's trailer just beyond the curve in the road. The trailer's white with blue awnings. Big oak tree. He's driving a green Taurus."

"Why are you revoking his bond?"

"I heard they're ready to arrest him again. For that carjacking that went bad Friday night. I've bonded him before, but it was for grand theft auto. He sells the occasional car to the chop shops in Tampa. But this is the big time. If he hears they want him for murder, he'll be gone instead of in court tomorrow. And I'm stuck with a twenty-five-thousand-dollar bond."

"You didn't get any security?"

"My stupid brother took his mother's trailer as security. If he was here, I'd kick his butt. That's the last thing I need is a widow's trailer. So you drive past the said trailer and see if the Taurus is there. There is a road, turns just past the trailer. I'll park down it and come up to the back door. You go to the front door and attract their attention. If he sees me, he'll be off like Benny the Bunny."

"I'll be the propane guy."

"Fine. Whatever. Just get going before he heads to Iowa or some place else where I can't find him."

Bubba opened the rear hatch of the white Bronco and rummaged through his stuff. He had an assortment of color-coded magnetic signs that purported to be indentifiers for the official suppliers of utilities for the county. He especially liked the orange and blue ones for Polk Propane Gas, which actually said, POLK PROPAIN IN THE GAS. He put one on each of the doors. Bubba had learned long ago that at six foot five and three hundred pounds he was never going to be invisible, so he settled for being dismissable. He put on an orange fluorescent vest and a white hard hat. He'd carry a clipboard when he went to the door. He'd set an orange cone by the rear of the Bronco when he stopped at the trailer. The people inside would never notice Gilroy sneaking across the backyard. Unless they had a big dog, then Gilroy had a problem.

"I'm set."

"Give me five minutes. Then drive up. Don't let him run out the front."

"Not a problem."

Bubba sat in the Bronco and thought about how much fun the

theater of the absurd was. Police work, bail bonds, investigating insurance fraud; all the world's a stage. Today was the magical misdirection tour.

When the time came, Bubba screeched to a halt in front of the trailer, got out, and placed the orange cone by the rear of the Bronco. Clipboard in hand, dark glasses in place, he headed up the walk. He'd seen curtains flutter when he arrived. They would all be watching him. He knocked on the door. There was a murmur of voices and the door opened. An old woman asked what he wanted. When she spoke Bubba realized that she couldn't be more than forty-five or so. But sun and cigarettes and beer had taken their toll on her skin.

"Our records show that you have a propane tank."

"Yes. Do our cooking and water heating with it. Is there a problem?"

"Just that it might be an older C-132 model with the reciprocating bivalve." The woman nodded like she had even more idea of what that was than Bubba did. Through the open door, he could see a young woman and a man sitting on the couch in the living room. A toddler staggered across the carpet after a ball. "There has been a recall order from the supplier and I've been assigned to check this area." Bubba tapped his finger on the clipboard to make the pronouncement official. The woman looked up at him and nodded again. Come on, Gilroy, he thought.

"If I could just check your tank," he said. Now Gilroy was easing in the back door. He nodded toward Bubba.

"Sure. I guess so," the woman answered.

"Sir, could you show it to me?" Bubba asked the man sitting on the couch. He looked at Bubba in surprise and started to rise. When he put his hand on the arm of the couch, Gilroy popped the edge of the handcuff on his wrist. The clickety-clack of the ratchet was audible across the room. When the man stood, Gilroy spun him and fastened the other cuff. Jerking the cuffs upward, he frogmarched the now-yelling man out the front door, past Bubba. The cold, practiced efficiency was impressive. Bubba tipped his hat at the women who were starting to yell questions. He grabbed the orange cone, tossing it on the passenger seat as he cranked the Bronco and U-turned back toward Bartow. The last view he had was of the young woman holding the child on her hip and walking across the yard after them.

They pulled back into the shopping center parking lot. While Bubba removed the signs and the vest, Gilroy came over with a C-note showing in his hand.

"That went fine. You ought to consider going to work for us

fulltime. We could open a branch office."

"And what would I do with all that money?"

**"If he goes to trial,
he'll get convicted sure
as the world is flat."**

"Buy a new SUV before this one is declared a historical treasure. Anyway, here's your money. I appreciate this. Let me get this mope back to the jail and clear my

paperwork. Drop by some time and we'll have a beer. Tell lies."

They shook hands. Gilroy was already driving south on New Combee Road headed for Bartow by the time Bubba entered traffic. Bubba smiled; it had been a fun afternoon. Now time for a good supper. Where to go out? Better yet. A big porterhouse steak from his favorite butcher grilling on the back porch. Elvis would enjoy the bone de jour.

The next morning Bubba was feeling complacent sitting behind his desk in the office. He'd done forty minutes on the treadmill at Big Al's Iron Works, then cooled down with the routine of stretching exercises that were supposed to restore the flexibility in his lower back and return the youthful ease he'd once possessed while doing heavy squats. Bubba wasn't sure about that, but at least he could still reach the laces on his New Balance Cross-Trainers. He'd showered, shaved, then breakfasted at the Haven Cafe with the usual gang of citrus people, business owners, A/C repairmen, politicians, and tourists—the people who ran Winter Haven. It was a quarter to nine; the brew was dripping in the Mr. Coffee; his feet were on the corner of the desk. All was right with Simms Investigations.

Footsteps came down the hall. Since there were no other offices besides his on this floor, Bubba knew someone was looking for him. Work. He took his feet off the desk and tried to look pleasant and occupied with business. But he couldn't stifle the yawn as the door opened and a young woman with a child on her hip walked in.

"Did I wake you?" she asked with a small smile as she stopped in front of his desk. Bubba recognized her from the day before.

"Just boredom. I'm sorry about yesterday. Nothing personal, you understand, just legal work."

"I understand." Her makeup didn't cover the bruise under her left eye, a couple of days old. The child balanced easily on her hip. She was slim with straight blond hair down past her shoulders, wearing jeans and a Busch Gardens T-shirt with a giraffe's face above the logo.

"Please sit down. Want coffee? It's fresh."

"That would be nice." She moved lightly even with the boy on her hip. She sat on the couch and stood the child on the carpet.

Her blue eyes contrasted with green-yellow of the bruise.

"Cream, sugar?"

"Two of each. Hot, sweet, and pale. Just like me. That's what Robert says." She blushed and dropped her head to fuss with the child, who had decided that this office was worthy of exploration. He had his eye on Elvis's chew rope, but his mother had the waistband of his shorts in hand. The little boy was clean, hair cut short and brushed back. His shirt had a blue druid, or something, on it.

"So Robert Carter is your husband?" Bubba asked as he fixed the coffee. Carter's mug shot had been the front page attraction on the morning paper. Charged with carjacking and the murder of a young woman named Charlene Bridges in Lakeland. The victim was the socially prominent second wife of a land developer and builder in Lakeland. The efficiency of the police had been recognized several times in the lead article. Gilroy and Bubba had not been mentioned at all.

"We've been together for seven years now. Stevie is his son. I'm Jennifer Mangram." She accepted the coffee and took a sip without relaxing her grip on the waistband. "Good. Thanks."

"How did you find me?" Bubba asked after he sat down behind the desk. He didn't think he'd left one of his business cards behind. And Gilroy never told anybody anything he didn't have to.

"The phone book."

"Under Fake Propane Guy?"

"No. When you came to the door I thought you looked familiar, then when you tipped your hat, I recognized you. You did the same thing the other time I saw you."

"When was that?"

"Fifteen years ago when I was seven. You came to our house to tell us my daddy was dead in a car wreck. A semi bumped his pickup into the side of freight train on Highway 60 east of Lake Wales."

"God, yes, I remember that. I'd just taken over as the sergeant for that area. So, he was your daddy. Now I helped put your baby's father in jail. I'm surprised you came here."

"You were so nice to my mama that night, and you were just doing legal stuff yesterday. Over the years, I've seen your name in the paper, like when you found out who killed Little John Dupree. But now I want your help. Robert didn't kill that poor woman."

"How do you know?"

"He was home with me and his mother. We watched TV all night."

"Did you tell the sheriff's department, the detectives?"

"Yes. They said thank you and hung up. So I came to see you."

Bubba could see the muscles in her forearm as she squeezed the coffee mug. Stevie was leaning at a forty-five degree angle in his attempt to escape.

"Who is Robert's lawyer? Tell him."

"Bill Johnson. He's legal aid. I called him yesterday. He said I'd be useful at the trial." She sat the coffee cup on the carpet and picked Stevie up.

"The police tend to ignore alibis from wives and mothers."

"But Robert didn't kill that woman. He's even worked for Mr. Bridges before. Doing landscaping. He wouldn't stab anyone. I want you to find out who did it. If he goes to trial, he'll get convicted sure as the world is flat."

"I think the world's round."

"Not if you've never left Polk County. Looks mighty flat to me." Stevie was squirming around and starting to take what looked like a deep breath for yelling.

"Put him down. He can't hurt anything."

"But he'll chew that rope thing, and unless you have really bad habits, I think it belongs to a dog." She sat the baby down, walked over and put the chew rope out of reach. A multicolored sunrise showed above the belt line of her jeans.

"Elvis is at home today. Why do you think they'll convict him if he didn't do it?"

"He's got a record. Grand theft auto. Assault. He gets into fights."

"Was he on meth when he hit you?"

"He doesn't . . . No, he was upset because he'd just found out his mother had had to put up her trailer as security for his bond, in addition to the twenty-five hundred we paid. I was just in the way." The baby climbed into Bubba's recliner and perched there regally.

"He hit you often?"

"Not often. And he has never even spanked Stevie. He really is a good man. He keeps on getting better and better. If he can stay out of jail, in a few more years, he'll be a fine man. There's still a lot of boy in him."

"Jennifer, the sheriff's department is good at what they do. If they think he did it, he most likely did."

"He didn't. I know it."

"Because he was home with you?"

"Because I know him. He might steal a car when times get tight. He might get his ass kicked when he's high. But he would never kill a woman like that one was."

"I charge two hundred and fifty dollars a day."

"Here's two days' worth. I'll get you whatever you need." Bubba

raised his eyebrows at the sight of the bills she brought from her back pocket.

"It's legal. I'm a cocktail waitress at the Peacock Club up on 192 by Disney. Started working there when Robert got laid off in February. I've been off the last week waiting for the eye to clear. I look good when I dress up. I can work every night if I have to to get Robert out of jail."

"Two days and no more if I decide I can't help. I'll call his lawyer and let him know I'm working on the case."

She nodded. Bubba wrote her a receipt. Then he pulled out his yellow notepad and started to ask her questions: phone numbers, addresses, lawyer's number, and so forth. Two pages were full when he finished. She even had a Carter family group picture at Busch Gardens that showed him clearly enough among the other skinny, sunburned crackers for identification. Stevie spent the time chewing on the arm of the recliner.

When they finished, she attached Stevie to her hip and headed for the door. She stopped in the doorway and said, "I'll call you tomorrow morning about ten." Bubba nodded, and then Jennifer flashed him a smile that remained after she left. I can understand why he keeps her, Bubba thought, but why in the world is she keeping him?

Bubba opened his briefcase and pulled out his notebook. He found Polk County Sheriff's Detective Lieutenant Ray Bisse's phone number and punched it in. Bisse answered it on the first ring.

"Good morning, Ray. Congratulations on nailing the carjacker," Bubba said.

"Thanks. I was feeling good before I heard your voice. Don't tell me the Colonel has taken this slimeball's case? That's all we need is his lawyer tricks getting this guy off."

"Not the Colonel this time. The wife. She says he's innocent."

"Of course she does."

"Says he was home that night."

"Did they go to church or just have a prayer meeting at home?"

"Such a cynic. Why are you so sure it's him?"

"Why should I tell you anything?" Bubba could picture the big jaw muscle clenched as he asked the question. They'd been friends for almost twenty years. As his sergeant, Bubba had trained Ray when he was a patrolman, but since Bubba's retirement he was, while not the enemy, no longer an equal.

"Because if you don't, someone else will. It's all part of discovery. And this way we continue our long friendship and professional relationship. Besides, I'll buy you lunch at John's."

"I'm dieting this week, but maybe you'll leave me and the

department alone if you know we have the right guy."

"Maybe. Why are you so sure?"

"The vic's husband saw him leaving the convenience store with a six-pack as he walked in."

"I saw this guy two days ago and I can't remember what he looks like, except like every other peckerwood who grew up in Polk County. Skinny, wearing his Billy Ray Cyrus hairdo."

"And the same Lion Country Safari T-shirt that Gilroy brought him into the jail with. By the way, good work on that."

"He came out of the store. That's it?"

"His fingerprints on the outside of the BMW. Surveillance of him getting into the BMW."

"I thought it was a carjacking."

"The vic's husband left the car running while he went in for some cigarettes. The wife was curled up sleeping in the passenger seat. Your mope must not have seen her through the tinted windows until it was too late. The tape shows the car screeching out after he gets into it. We found the car a couple of miles away. Dead woman in it. Stab wounds to the chest. This time your client's going to sit on Ol' Sparky's lap. Murder One for this."

"Ray, I trust your judgment. Are you sure this is the guy?"

"Come look at his sheet. Grand theft auto. Twice. Assault three times. Domestic battery. DUI. This guy's a walking time bomb and we got him off the streets."

"I agree he sounds like a dirtbag, but did he kill this woman?"

"Her husband said he did. The tape shows his skinny, mullet-headed ass walking past the BMW. Thirty seconds later, he runs back to it, climbs in and it's gone. He did it."

"Clear face getting into it?"

There was a pause. "No. His back. Face going out of the store. His skinny, mullet-headed, white T-shirt back getting in the car thirty-two seconds later."

"What's Carter say?"

"SODDI. But just who that Some Other Dude that Did It was, he doesn't know. He touches lots of cars, he says. Compulsion. Then the lawyer tells him to be quiet. And I think I am going to take the lawyer's advice. I'm shutting up."

"Ray, I told his wife that I'd stay with this until I was sure one way or the other. You say you have the right guy. But I know that if he isn't the guy, then you want whoever used the knife, not just a conviction. If you leave a copy of the tapes at the front desk, I'll have a messenger pick them up."

"Bubba, you're swimming in a cesspool this time. Don't sink." Bisse hung up.

Bubba felt the urge to move. The office was too small now. He hated it when clients lied to him, even though he expected it. As he walked down the stairs and out to the parking lot, he wondered why Jennifer had lied about her husband being home with her. She had to know he'd find out. After all, he was advertised as a private detective. Maybe that was his first test. If he couldn't see a lie that big, then how could he dissolve an open-and-shut case of murder?

As he opened the Bronco, he decided to take a look at the convenience store where the abduction took place. Driving always relaxed him. He'd take Elvis along. Elvis would enjoy the ride with his head out the window even if he didn't find any clues.

The convenience store was only two blocks off U.S. 92 North in one of the unincorporated areas still waiting for Lakeland to annex it. U.S. 92 was a bustling six-lane ribbon of furniture stores, chain restaurants, fast-food joints, motels, and anything else that would be of interest to the people driving to the North Lakeland Mall. Bubba had never worked this area when he was a sergeant. He'd stayed mostly to the easterly, more rural side of the county. But he recognized the ambience around the convenience store. The Chamber of Commerce would never put this block on their brochure. It was another free-trade zone. The good citizens of Lakeland could drive a couple of blocks past the advertised specials of U.S. 92 and barter for what they needed. Four young facilitators stood in the shade of an oak tree at the corner of a vacant lot beside the convenience store. They pointedly ignored Bubba as he parked at the front of the store. Neither he nor the Bronco had lost their former official demeanor. Elvis howled as Bubba went inside the store.

The clerk was willing, even happy, to talk about the carjacking, even if he had not been there that night. Bubba bought a forty-four-ounce diet soda in a cup and a Slim Jim for Elvis. As he walked out the door, he could see the surveillance cameras mounted high on light poles. Prominent signs requested you to smile for the cameras. The clerk had told Bubba that they hadn't been robbed since the lights and cameras had been installed. Robert Carter must have some serious impulse control issues to take a car from here. The mall was only two miles away and the pickings were always easy there.

Bubba climbed into the Bronco and peeled the wrapper back on the Slim Jim. This was the dog's test. If he couldn't find artificially scented food in the front seat of a Bronco, how could he find a raccoon at night? The smoky aroma brought Elvis to attention. He passed the test.

Bubba cranked up the AC and left the windows down. Then he drove onto the vacant lot and stopped beside the four young men who were casually watching the traffic flow past.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. I was looking for Joker Marchant stadium, where the Tigers train."

"You're the joker. Beat it. Your exhaust is bad for my allergies," the tallest of the four said. Then he stepped to the other side of the shade. One of the others, short but stocky, stepped up to the truck window and reached his hand out to Elvis.

"What is this? Undercover K-9?"

"Elvis is a bluetick hound from Tennessee. He tracks miscreants."

"Smells more like a Slim Jim to me."

"You are correct. Since you seem to be an alert young man, you might be able to help me."

"Why would I want to help a cop? Even an old cop?"

"I'm a private detective now." Bubba reached across the seat and handed him a card. "I am investigating the carjacking from the convenience store."

"What a load of crap that was. We had to move two blocks away all weekend while the cops and news trucks were all over the place. Bogus deal, man, bogus."

"Do you recognize the guy holding the baby?" Bubba held the picture out with a twenty folded between his fingers.

"For fifty I might put on my reading glasses."

Bubba nodded and reached into his shirt pocket. He held the money in his other hand. The young man took the picture and held it close to his face. "Yep, I recognize him. He stops by occasionally."

"Was he here the night of the carjacking?"

"Who knows? We don't exactly take reservations or schedule appointments. Besides, I wasn't working that night."

"What's he stop by for?"

"He's a peckerwood. What do you think he stops by for?"

"Meth?"

"You are a detective. He and his brother crank it up once in a while."

"His brother?"

"Yeah, the guy with the tiger shirt in the picture. Don't you know anything?"

"Sometimes I wonder."

Cars started slowing down and speeding off.

"Conversation is over, Private Detective Simms. Business calls. My fifty please."

Bubba handed him the fifty, and he took it and gently shook

Elvis's head, making his ears flap. Bubba backed out onto the street and drove away; Elvis howled back at them. A car stopped at the curb and the tallest man was there when the window went down.

The Carters' trailer was only about five miles away, fifteen minutes at most. In person seemed to be the most civilized way to return the money Jennifer had given him, less the fifty. He'd promised to stay with the case until he was satisfied. He wasn't all that satisfied by the day's results, but he certainly felt sure. He parked in the same shady place he'd used before. He ran the windows up enough that Elvis wouldn't squeeze out. The middle-aged woman was sitting on the porch in an aluminum chair, smoking. A metal ashtray stood next to the chair. Bubba stopped at the steps.

"Mrs. Carter, I'm Bubba Simms."

"I know. You helped take Robert away."

"Is Jennifer here?"

"Getting ready for work. The shower just stopped. She'll be out in a minute."

Bubba nodded and leaned against the pole at the bottom of the steps. She had pointedly ignored offering him the other aluminum chair. Either she was angry about him taking Robert away or thought he'd flatten the chair.

"She hired you, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"Find out anything?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I'll tell her."

"I bet you will. She'll jump you through the hoops just like she does Robert. She looks so sweet and innocent, but she looked that way when Robert got tired of paying and brought her home to live. Now she leads him around like a puppy dog. But then, Robert's weak, not like Taylor, his older brother. Taylor wouldn't let no woman lead him around, no way."

Bubba continued to lean against the pole, glad for the ten feet of separation from the woman. The screen door to the trailer opened and Jennifer stood there in a short robe and long legs with a towel wrapped around her hair.

"Mr. Simms. Did you find out something already?"

"That you lied to me. I'm returning your retainer."

"What? No, you can't . . . Stevie's crying. Wait right there. I'll be right back." The door slammed shut. Bubba could hear the boy crying.

"So she lied to you too. I'm not surprised. But I still see how you looked at her, knowing she was a liar and all. Men. All alike. And I've seen my share having to raise those two boys all alone. Men." The woman had a smile of satisfaction as she stubbed the cigarette out in the sand.

Bubba began to see how she'd had to raise those two boys all alone. He felt like nailing the money to the porch support and driving away.

"You going to get my Robert off?"

Bubba pointedly ignored her.

"If you find out who did it, you going to tell the sheriff or just keep it to yourself, thinking you can sneak back and get next to Miss Jennifer?"

"Shut up, Myrtle," Jennifer said as she opened the door. She was barefoot, in jeans and T-shirt, with Stevie perched on her hip. Her blond hair was a tangled mess pushed back off her face. She stepped toward Bubba. "What's going on?"

He reached into his pocket and held out the bills. "I'm returning your retainer. You lied to me about Robert being with you."

She glanced over her shoulder at Myrtle. "Walk over to your truck where we can talk." Bubba followed her. She patted Elvis's nose poking through the window crack. She turned to face Bubba. "Of course I lied. If I had told you he was out somewhere and wouldn't tell me where, would you have taken the case? Hell no."

"The police have him on videotape at the scene. His fingerprints are on the victim's car. He buys crank from dealers in that area. I'm satisfied he did it. It wasn't merely your lies." He held out the money. She slapped his hand away. The bills fluttered to the grass.

"Robert didn't kill that woman. I know it. In here, I know it." She tapped her chest with her free hand. Bubba tried not to watch the hand too closely. The shirt was damp from her shower.

Bubba tapped his head. "In here, I know he was there and he did it."

"He didn't. I ain't going to allow my son to grow up without his father. I grew up without mine and I know who I became. Robert and Taylor grew up with her alone, and I see who they are. Stevie will have a father. No matter what I have to do." Her blue eyes were cold but direct with meaning. "Find out who did it. I'll pay you whatever you charge."

Bubba broke contact with her eyes. He could smell apple shampoo. "If he didn't do it, then what was he doing that night?"

"Probably buying meth, after promising me and Stevie he wouldn't. Probably him and Taylor getting high."

"Why didn't he tell the detectives?"

"Taylor's on probation for possession. He tests positive, he goes back to prison. Robert wouldn't let that happen."

"Taylor will let him face first degree murder to avoid violating his probation?"

"Sure. Taylor's mean, but Robert admires him. Wants his big brother to respect him. Besides, what good would it do for Taylor to talk? Who's going to believe a crankhead that his brother didn't go steal a car and kill some woman?"

Bubba nodded. She was right. A meth addict brother wouldn't be much of an alibi. Stevie was rubbing his nose on Elvis's. Elvis licked Stevie's face without Jennifer noticing it. She was still staring at Bubba.

"So Robert's just a victim of circumstance. Wrong place, wrong time."

"It happens. We both know that. Besides, Robert and Taylor like Mr. Bridges. Taylor ran one of his maintenance crews until a couple of months ago when the building market got tight. Robert worked on the crew too. They were both just waiting for Bridges to open back up and put them to work. They liked him. He didn't treat them like a couple of burnouts."

"So Robert's real alibi sucks too. We can't just prove he didn't do it. We have to prove someone else did it."

"I know he didn't do it. Will you look into who did do it? For me, please. For Stevie?" She reached out and touched Bubba's forearm. He could hear Myrtle's cackle from the porch. He nodded.

She smiled and rearranged Stevie on her hip. "I have to get to work now. Take the money back. If you need more, let me know." Her blue eyes were alive. Bubba felt their intensity. Then she turned and walked across the yard. He bent and retrieved the money. The stretching exercises seemed to be working. She waved as she entered the trailer. Myrtle gave him the finger.

Bubba was not relaxed by the time he reached home despite the half hour drive, but the messenger had left his package against the front door. Bubba opened it and removed the two tapes. After watching each of them four times, he knew there was something there, but he wasn't sure what it was. Turning off the TV, he went to the back porch to sit in his rocker and throw the tennis ball through the open door. The ball would roll down the slope and Elvis would track it down and return it. By the time the ball was soggy and Elvis was panting, Bubba felt ready to go to work. Who-done-it time.

When the wife is killed, look at the husband. Page one of the detective manual. It was only a quarter after five; Arnie should still be in his office.

"Hey, Arnie, how's the world of unpaid claims?" Bubba said when Arnie answered on the speaker phone. Bubba could hear Arnie fade and grow louder as he walked laps around his office trying to lose weight.

"Growing bigger by the minute. What can I do for you?"

"Does State have any interest in the Bridges murder?"

"Thank God, no. The Rock gets all of that. I was talking to Homer over there about that this morning. They have a keyman of a million on her."

"Keyman? She worked for the construction company?"

"Not hardly. Did you ever see her? I met her once, and wow. But for some tax reason or other, she was a partner in Bridges, Ltd. The things middle-aged developers will do for trophy wives. So she was in the same group policy for all the real players. Homer is moaning in his beer. Soon as they convict that guy, The Rock has to write a check. Bridges is pushing them now, wants his money. Better them than us."

"Interesting."

"Is there something I ought to know?"

"I was just wondering if you needed me to look into the murder."

"Bubba, what's going on? You don't call for work, ever. You know something."

"Not really."

"Here's Homer's number. Make yourself a buck or two if you can. Just remember who brought you to the dance."

"Thanks, Arnie."

Bubba hung up and fixed himself a glass of iced tea. Elvis was asleep on the porch. After watching the tapes again, Bubba opened his address book and called Gilroy. Tommy would be at his office until nine or so. Lots of work in the evenings and early mornings.

The receptionist put Bubba on hold. Then Gilroy picked up and said, "What's shaking?"

"I need some info that I can't get this late in the day. I thought you might be able to."

"What is it?"

"Do you know Taylor Carter?"

"Of course. The older brother of the one you helped. The real bastard of the family. What do you want to know?"

"You ever bond him?"

"Of course."

"How about pulling a TRW on him for me? See what's shaking with him?"

There was a short silence. "What are you working on?"

"Robert's wife hired me to look into the murder. Says he didn't

do it. Says he was off with his brother."

"What an alibi that is. Hang on a second. I'll punch him up. Okay, here we go. Ninety days late, ninety days late. Electric, phone, truck payment. All past ninety until Monday. How about that. He got righteous on Monday. Must have robbed someone over the weekend."

"Thanks, Tommy."

"No problem. Now you owe me one."

Bubba made a few more calls that resulted in a few more calls and conversations that lasted until after eleven. All that resulted in an appointment at the Polk County jail for ten the next morning.

Bubba was dressed up in his khaki slacks and a dark blue polo shirt when he arrived at the sheriff's office in Bartow at a quarter to ten. He stopped and talked to the desk sergeant and two of the secretaries before Lieutenant Bisse came out to escort him back to Interrogation Room Number 3.

"I brought donuts from Roy's," Bubba said as he held the white sack aloft.

"I hope you brought more than that, though the best donuts in the county are always appreciated," Bisse said, then took possession of the sack.

"Everyone here?"

"Still waiting on Carter's legal aid. He's on his way."

They arrived at the room. It was a twelve-by-fifteen-foot room in bureaucratic green. There was a wooden table bolted to the floor. Six metal chairs were distributed around the table. A TV on a roller stand with a tape player attached sat in the corner. A well-dressed woman with curly brown hair sat at the far end of the table. She had a cup of coffee in front of her, an open briefcase to the side. She smiled.

"Roy's. I knew we could count on you, Bubba," she said. Linda Brill was the assistant state's attorney handling Carter's prosecution. She and Bubba had worked together on a number of cases while he was a sergeant in the sheriff's department. Bubba had found her to be intelligent, clever, focused, and a joy to work with when he remembered not to stare at her chest. "I hope the rest of your ideas are as helpful."

The three of them were enjoying glazed donuts when the door opened and a young man, skinny with glasses and premature male pattern baldness entered, carrying a briefcase. He smiled. "Donuts. I didn't have breakfast yet." He turned to each person and stuck out his hand. "Bill Johnson." Everyone introduced themselves. "Are we all set?" he asked. They nodded. "Are we ready for my client?"

Bisse nodded and left the room. He returned with a cup of coffee in a disposable cup for the legal aid attorney. They could hear the clank of a deputy coming down the hall. A prisoner in handcuffs and wearing the standard orange jumpsuit entered in front of a huge deputy who grinned at Bubba. "Hi, Sarge." He unfastened one cuff, ran the end through the D-ring at the end of the table and refastened it to the left wrist, then left the room.

Robert Carter looked much like he had sitting on the couch when Bubba had first met him, except for the color of the clothes. His hair was wet, combed back, curling at his shoulders. His brown eyes darted around the room. "Why am I here? Can I have a donut?" Bisse placed a paper towel in front of Carter and sat a donut on it.

"You are here, Mr. Carter," Linda Brill said, "because Mr. Simms here, working for your wife and your lawyer, convinced us to talk to you again and review the evidence with you. He thinks you're innocent. That in and of itself doesn't carry much weight, but his speculations do."

"I been telling y'all I'm innocent. I didn't stab anybody."

"You have also been telling us you weren't near the carjacking, the BMW, or anything else. Isn't that right?"

"Are we on the record here, Ms. Brill?" Johnson asked.

"No tape recorder, no note taking. Very off the record. We just want to be sure we have the right man. At this moment, your client is the right man."

"Okay, my client might have been mistaken about when he was at that convenience store. He gets dates confused. So now what?"

"We want to show you the two surveillance tapes from the convenience store on the night of the carjacking that are part of your discovery request. He doesn't need to say anything. We want him to know how serious the evidence is against him. Lieutenant Bisse, will you run the tape."

Ray turned on the TV and cued up the black and white tape. It showed the date and time. "This is the first tape, made inside the store," Bisse said.

The room remained quiet as Robert Carter in sharp focus came to the counter and paid for a six-pack of Coors Light. He even had to show his driver's license. Bisse ejected the tape and inserted another.

"This is from the outside camera on the left side," he said. The tape showed Robert Carter leave the convenience store carrying a bag. He touched the top of the BMW as he strolled by, then he walked past the camera angle into the night. Bisse stopped the tape.

"See I told you. I didn't do nothing. Bought some beer and left," Carter said. He'd finished the donut and was eyeing the box.

"Why that convenience store, Mr. Carter? There are several much closer to your home."

"Just 'cause. I was out driving. I bought the beer, got in my car and drove off. I'm not crazy enough to do anything in that parking lot. Everyone knows about those cameras."

"Were you there to buy crystal meth?" she asked.

"My client's not charged with any drug charges."

"Nor will he be. But we'd like to hear the truth, not this crap."

"No crap. I got in my car and drove off."

"Who was with you?"

"No one."

"Then who is this?" She nodded at Bisse and punched play on the player. A woman left the convenience store and turned right. Then a man who looked like Robert Carter came running back into the scene. He went straight to the BMW, opened the door, and climbed in. The car reversed and was gone into the dark. The tape stopped.

"So Robert, perhaps you can see why we think you are the right guy."

Robert sat looking at the TV. No one spoke. They all looked at Robert.

"Play the whole tape from the outside camera again, please," Bubba said.

Bisse cued it up and the tape rolled. When the man came running back into the scene, Bubba said, "That's it. Stop the tape. Look at the shoes." The man was wearing black running shoes. The others looked at Bubba.

"Run the tape back to Robert leaving the store," he said and waited. "Stop. There. What color are the shoes?"

The shoes were clearly white. Everyone looked at each other, except Robert. He continued to look at the TV screen. Bisse punched out the tape and slapped it on the table. "So Robert had an accomplice. Still makes it murder one. Still sends him to the chair. He killed her, his partner killed her, makes no difference, does it, Ms. Brill?"

"Not much. Who drove off in the BMW? You had to see him go by."

"I didn't kill anyone." Carter's voice was barely audible.

Bisse kicked the leg of the table. "I told y'all before this meeting started that this mope killed Charlene Bridges. Now we know he has an accomplice. The tape shows him indicating the car for his partner. Then he slips off the scene and his partner does the deed.

It's cold murder one. Let me take him back to his cell. We caught ol' White Shoes. We'll find Mr. Black Shoes."

Ms. Brill shook her head. "He says he didn't do it, but I think he knows who did. Mr. Simms, we appreciate your noticing the discrepancy with the shoes. So tell us again, what do you think happened?"

Bubba finished chewing his last bite of donut and pushed the box toward Robert, who took another without changing the blank expression on his face. Bubba sipped his coffee before he spoke.

"I think that Robert is being set up. I think that Mrs. Bridges was killed deliberately. Anybody think about why a guy like Bridges in that 7-Series BMW was in that neighborhood on a Friday night? Why he would leave the car unlocked with the engine running? Why were there two skinny mullet-heads in white T-shirts waiting in that parking lot?"

"Robert, as your attorney I must tell you that withholding any information at this time is a bad idea. You didn't kill Mrs. Bridges, but someone did, and you don't need to go to jail for their crime."

Robert didn't speak, just held the donut unbitten in his hand. The assistant state's attorney spoke in a quiet voice. "Between all of us in this room, the tox screen from Charlene Bridges's autopsy came back this morning. She had enough Valium in her system to render her unconscious at the time of her death. Her life was heavily insured. We think this was a murder for hire. Now, Robert is either an innocent participant or he was a hired killer. Not much in between," Ms. Brill said.

Bisse kicked the table again, startling everyone. He glared at Robert and said, "By the way, Taylor, your brother deposited four thousand dollars in new, crisp, hundred-dollar bills the day we arrested you. How much money do you have in the bank?"

Robert leaned toward his attorney and whispered to him. Johnson nodded. "Could I have a moment alone with my client?" Carter whispered again. "And could he have a Pepsi?"

Linda grinned at Bubba as they stood up. He smiled back into her brown eyes. Ray slapped him on the back as they filed out of the room.

Bubba parked under the shade tree at the Carters' trailer. It was almost three in the afternoon. Jennifer met him halfway across the yard. She was wearing cutoffs and a striped tube top. Her hair was pulled back.

"What's happening? We heard that they arrested Taylor."

Bubba told her about the morning's meeting, about how Robert

told them that he and Taylor had gone to score some crank that night. That Taylor had told him he could make some money muling for a guy. That Robert had driven off after buying the beer and met Taylor an hour later over near the mall. Taylor had given him fifty dollars for driving him around. The detectives were questioning Taylor and Mr. Bridges at the moment. Robert would have to testify, but that the murder charges were going to be dropped.

"Gilroy will probably go the bond for the grand theft auto again," Bubba said.

Jennifer threw her arms around him. He held her shoulders, feeling the roped muscles of her deltoids as she spoke into his chest, "He can beat the auto charge. That's not a problem. Stevie will have his dad back. That's what matters. How can I ever thank you, Bubba?"

Bubba stepped away from her. He pulled an envelope from his pocket and handed it to her. She took it and looked sideways at him. "What's this?"

"Your retainer. I negotiated a fee from the insurance company that had Mrs. Bridges's policy."

"But you earned this."

"I tried to call you last night at the Peacock Club to let you know what was happening. They said you hadn't worked there since they fired you for dating customers."

Jennifer flapped the envelope against her leg, folded it, and stuck it in her hip pocket. Her eyes were cold when she looked up at Bubba.

"Somebody had to pay the bondsman. Somebody had to get Stevie's father home. But I guess you're too good to take my money."

"No, but I figure you need it more than I do, that you worked a lot harder for it than I did."

"You can't imagine. You have no idea. But Stevie's father is coming home, so I have to thank you for that." She turned and walked toward the trailer. Myrtle opened the door and laughed. Jennifer pushed past her.

Bubba climbed into the Bronco and drove away. Afternoon traffic was building on Combee Road and the flow was frantic. Bubba thought it was time to get Elvis and head for the woods. A long walk and the scent of a raccoon might make the evening bearable. ♀

COOKIES

MOLLY MACRAE
AND STEPHEN JOHNSTON

The truth? Sometimes it's better if you just feel it than if you actually try to know it. Not easy to do, though, I'll admit. Case in point. While I was flying back from a seminar in D.C., feeling good on some of those little airline bottles of wine, my wife, Claire, was home gulping thirty-five Sleep-Knight gel caps and chasing them with a forty-ounce bottle of The Macallan, the priciest single malt in my collection.

Whatever truth lay behind Claire's suicide drifted away with her last breath and all I had left was her note. It contained her version of things, which didn't even come close to the truth. But maybe that's not entirely true, either. Maybe she did brush up against it a little.

She left the note on the nightstand where I couldn't miss it.

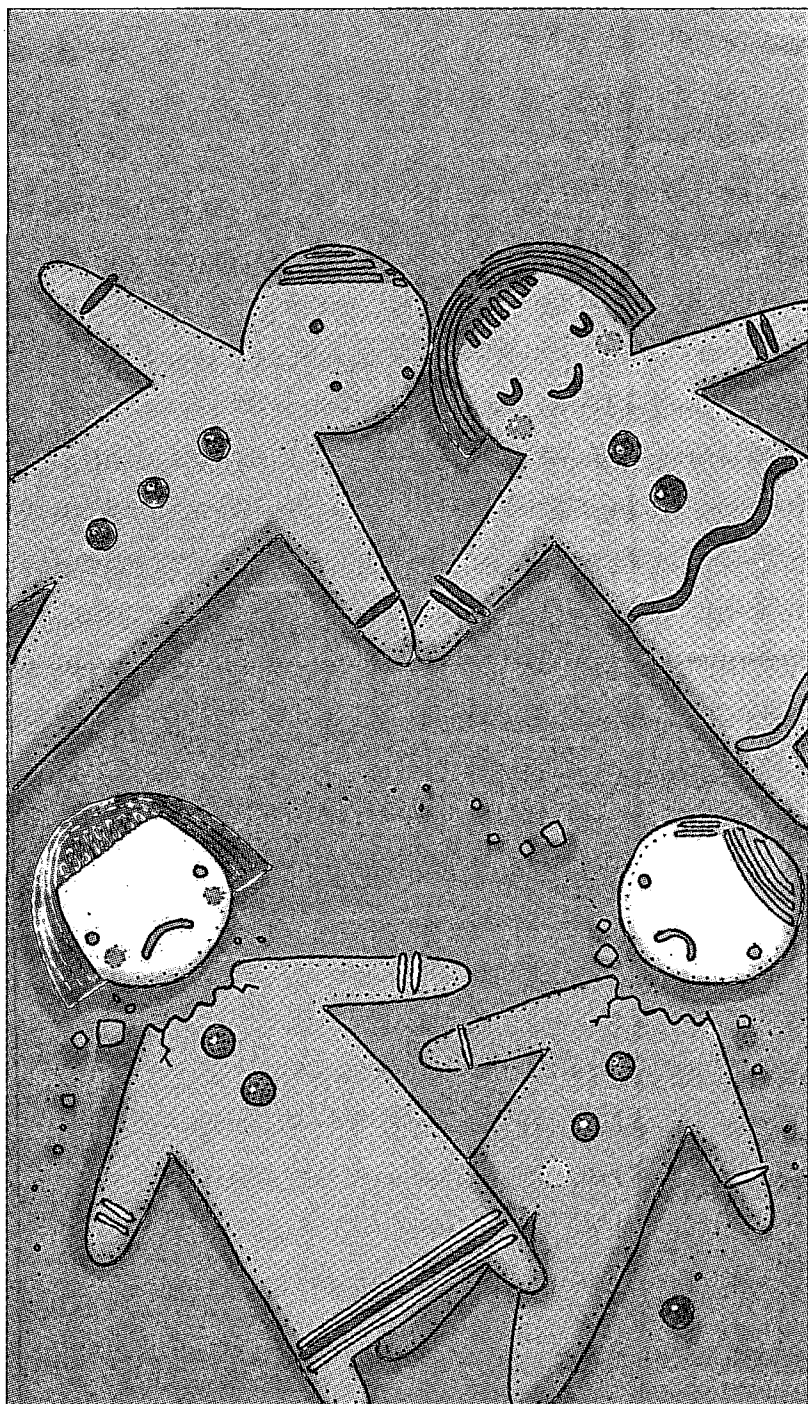
"Sam," it said in her jagged, crazy handwriting, "I don't love you, and you don't love me, so that makes us even. Don't deny it. You'd rather be with Delia. But you wouldn't have the nerve to have an affair, would you? No. I didn't think so. God, I'm tired. Claire."

That was it. I was alone. And I was numb, except to the questions that probably plague any guy whose wife kills herself. Why didn't she tell me? Why didn't she just leave?

Eventually reality did sink in. Claire ended her pain by ending her life. Only she knew why she had chosen that particular way out. Nothing I could do now would change any of it. And where was the truth in any of that?

It was the Delia thing I didn't get. Delia and I work together and we're friends, sure. But did that mean there was something going on between us? Hey, I'm a computer jock. That should tell you everything you need to know.

My patch is downtown on Canal at the Chicago Division of the FBI. I am of the bureau, you might say, but not with it. I'm part of the geek squad that troubleshoots and does systems maintenance for those unwashed masses who cannot. It is endlessly



amazing to me that people who are intelligent enough to work for the bureau can also be blind to the most basic computer functions. They can turn them on, create documents, and plug data into spreadsheets. But when something goes wrong? Cubicle panic!

That's when I get to play hero.

And keep my trap shut. There're any number of smart remarks I could whip out in these situations, and believe me, I have a list. But it's not worth it. Basically I'm invisible to the agents, an extension of the equipment. And we each have our own talents and lack thereof, don't we? I mean, I love lasagna, but ask me to whip some up for dinner and I'll give you a look as blank as the Blue Screen of Death.

Delia is a forensic document analyst working with the Violent Crimes Taskforce, specifically, serial crimes. She's into graphite and ink and I doubt she could live without her microscope. She can give you ten reasons why the signature on a ransom note is a forgery, backed up by documentation, scientific evidence, and what she likes to call her intuitive artistic genius. But, like most of the other agents, she's not completely hardwired when it comes to her computer.

The first time I met Delia, her machine was down and whatever the problem was had squirmed in so deep I ended up spending the whole morning trying to dig it out again. And when I finally did figure it out, the only solution was a total reformat.

"Oh," she said, when I gave her the news. "So, you want to eat lunch?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't look so surprised. You do eat, don't you?"

We went out for Thai. She knew a little place around a corner I'd never noticed, where a fog of spices met us at the door and the green chicken curry brought tears to my eyes, it was that good and that hot.

"Dessert?" she asked, refilling my cup with steaming jasmine tea.

Over sweet mango sticky rice, we compared notes on other restaurants in the neighborhood and discovered that we also liked Mediterranean, Mexican, and, of all things, Mongolian. She made a joke about the first letters spelling "Mmm" and swiped the last spoonful of mango from my bowl. We had a great time and I think we both knew we'd stumbled into a good thing.

After that we ate lunch together a lot, but there wasn't anything more to it. We talked, sure. We talked about everything, but especially about food, which turned out to be Delia's favorite subject.

To my delight, I discovered she wasn't just a brilliant handwriting analyst. She was also a genius in the kitchen.

"It's all in the details, Sam," she said. "Like handwriting. Once you know what you're doing, you're set. After that, it's all practice and fine tuning."

And practice she did. She brought me the leftovers for lunch.

Oh, man, the aromas winding through the corridors when she heated those dishes. I'd catch a whiff of cumin as I power cycled a machine. Ginger, curry, chilies, a hint of saffron. They found me wherever I was and drew me to the seventh-floor break room. Soon we were eating lunch in her office every day.

That's all it was, though. Lunch and talk.

But I guess Claire didn't see it that way.

Then again, Claire didn't cook, so maybe she just got tired of hearing how the flavor of Delia's incredible cannelloni lingered and how I wasn't really hungry for the microwaved, freezer-burned fish sticks she slapped down in front of me.

Or maybe I just talked about Delia too much. But isn't that what couples do? Talk about their friends? It's not like I didn't talk about Claire to Delia too. And Delia told me all about her husband, Carmichael.

"He can't process vitamin B," she told me, pouring gazpacho into our bureau mugs. "Which means he has permanent glossitis."

"Glossitis? Isn't that when people speak in tongues? Wriggle on the floor and all that?"

"I wish," she said, and I saw she was about to cry. "At least he would be able to say *something*. Glossitis means his tongue is permanently inflamed. He can't talk."

"Oh." I thought of Claire. Glossitis would probably improve our relationship.

Delia watched as I drained my mug and I wondered how cold soup could make a guy feel so warm.

"Sam, it also means Carmichael can't taste anything."

"Damn."

I told Claire about it that evening.

"So?" she said. She didn't even look up from the take-out pizza menu. "What are you getting so worked up about? Why do you care?"

"Because she's my friend, Claire."

It dawned on me then that Claire didn't really have any friends. Not ones she kept for any length of time anyway. Maybe she didn't know how. It's sad, now that I think about it. Circuit boards are an open book to me. Claire was a code I couldn't read.

Even sadder is what happened after Claire died. I've always said that computer glitches don't happen in isolation. Now I

know that senseless tragedies don't either. Carmichael killed himself a week after Claire did.

"He threw himself out of our living room window," Delia sobbed into the phone when I called to offer my condolences. "While I was in the kitchen making Irish stew."

"My God."

They lived on the fourteenth floor of an older building on the near North side. Not a good height to jump from, worse to land. The first she knew anything was wrong was when she walked into the living room, saw the open window, and heard people screaming on the street below. She stuck her head out the window, looked down, and saw why they were screaming.

It turns out that Carmichael left a note too. He said he couldn't stand to see her disappointment every time they sat down for a meal, and why didn't she just get it over with and start up with me, and how it was obvious that she loved me, and a whole bunch of other guilt-inducing stuff that made me feel even lower than I already did about Claire.

So that was one more thing Delia and I had in common. Through a simple friendship and a love for good food, we'd driven our spouses over the edge.

We saw each other at their funerals. We'd actually never spent time together outside the office lunches, and I'd had to look up her number to call her when I read about Carmichael in the *Trib*. But now we felt drawn together over something more than linguini with shrimp in white wine sauce. We knew each other's pain. Even the similarity of the suicide notes drew us closer together.

The first physical contact we had was when we hugged beside Carmichael's grave.

Delia phoned a couple of weeks later.

"Hi, Sam. You want to eat lunch?"

Somewhere in the back of my mind it occurred to me this should be awkward, but the truth was, it wasn't.

I'd returned to work that week. Delia was still on personal leave. We met at a Greek place on Clark, and it was an obvious relief to both of us to be doing something normal again. We even ordered the flaming *saganaki* and yelled "Opah!" It was a nice time. Something beyond whatever guilt either of us felt. Looking at Delia over my glass of red wine, I felt my system coming back to life.

"How about dinner at my place tomorrow night?" she asked before we parted.

"I'd like that."

"Grain-fed Angus at seven thirty, then."
"I'll bring the Bull's Blood."

She greeted me at the door with a smile and a kiss on the cheek.
"You're looking good, Sam."

She looked good too. Maybe she was getting past some of her grief. She shivered when we hugged briefly and I wondered if she was dressed warmly enough. She had on some kind of small, sleeveless black dress, but I forgot all about her bare arms when the aroma coming out of her kitchen caught my attention. I could almost see a cartoon cloud of scent billow toward and around me, dragging me inside.

And then, during dinner, the strangest thing happened. I started to cry.

"Oh, Sam," Delia said, "it's been hard for me too. Is it too soon?"

I shook my head, unable to speak. How could I tell her the truth about what I was feeling? I wasn't crying because I missed Claire. I wasn't suddenly succumbing to the horror and emptiness of her death. I was crying because I felt as though I'd finally come home. Somehow she knew that.

"It's okay, Sam," she said. "It's okay." Then she picked up her fork and gave me a look. "I know what it is. It's the roast beef." She took a bite and wiggled her eyebrows. "It's too damn good."

I laughed, as she knew I would. And my heart was won.

"Ah, but it's not just roast beef," I said, wiping my eyes, "It's Roast Beef." I emphasized the capital letters with a flourish of my napkin. "Roast Beef, Medium Rare with Oven-Browned Rosemary Potatoes and the Richest, Thickest Gravy known to humankind, accompanied by Perfectly Steamed and Seasoned Vegetables." I lifted my glass and swirled the red liquid around. "In fact, this meal deserves something better than Bull's Blood."

She raised her eyebrows.

"What we need is a 1993 Chateau Tombeuraux. They say it's unbelievable. Trouble is, I've looked everywhere. Can't be found."

"Ah, Sam, the '93," Delia said, her eyes shining. "Let me see what I can do. I have my ways."

We drank, then, to Delia's ways. By the end of the meal, when a plate of warm, dark, fudgy brownies and a carafe of Bailey's coffee made their appearance, I was ready to move in.

"You could stay, you know, Sam, if you like," she said a little later, after the conversation and the candles on the table died down.

But I left, reluctantly, and with an odd feeling of confusion. I rode the El south, staring out the window, seeing nothing. I took

the elevator up to my cold apartment that didn't smell of anything, and lay in my large, empty bed thinking about everything.

I called Delia first thing the next morning.

"Did you miss me, Sam?"

Three days later I sublet my place and moved in with her.

Things were great after that. We'd drive into work in her little red two-seater. She'd give me a lingering kiss that tasted of everything good, then off she'd go to analyze her documents while I kept the Bureau's computers up and humming. We met for perfect lunches every day and made our dinner plans. We couldn't get enough of each other.

At home in the evenings, I poured the wine, Delia cooked, and we talked and ate and . . .

"We deserve to be happy, Sam," Delia purred, one night in bed.

I kissed the small of her back and slipped out from under the covers. "We deserve more of that dark chocolate raspberry mousse too."

I was back with the bowl and two spoons in seconds.

And then one Saturday afternoon, the computer in Delia's study crashed.

"Sam?"

I was in the kitchen rooting through the fridge for leftover Pad Thai noodles, but abandoned the search when I heard her panicked call.

"Sweets?"

She jumped up from the desk and turned to me with that helpless, frustrated look I knew so well from the bureau.

"I was looking for that Spanish garlic soup recipe, the one with the saffron, and now the screen is frozen. Tell me you can fix it."

"Just in case, can you come up with something equally delicious for dinner?" I asked. First things first.

She nodded. "Italian."

"Ah, Italian . . . you know I love you and Italian more than life itself, don't you?"

Delia's throaty laugh was all I needed to hear.

"Good news and bad news, then," I said. "The bad news is I still haven't found any Chateau Tombeuraux to go with it. According to the *Trib*, the stock is gone. Sold out." I pointed at her computer. "The good news is that I can definitely fix that."

I chucked her under the chin and shooed her out of the study, then sat down to sort out the problem. I heard chopping and smelled garlic, and I knew the culinary sorceress was at work. I per-

formed a bit of my own wizardry and called out to her.

"You have a virus, my love."

It was a Trojan, the worst kind. It had wormed its way deep inside her computer and was wreaking havoc.

"Killed it," I said, as she came into the room with a tray. "The little rascal was in one of your system files. I sent it to the ninth circle of Hell, just for you."

"Must be hot there," she said.

Actually, the ninth circle of Hell was cold, but I didn't correct her.

She set a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of cookies on the desk and said, "These are hot too." Then she came around behind the chair and put her arms around me, nuzzling her head into the side of my neck. "Freshly ground beans, real cream, and Danish butter cookies still warm from the oven," she murmured in my ear.

God I loved this woman. She stood up again, and I turned the swivel chair around to face her.

"I'm going to check out the rest of your hard drive, see if I find any more trouble spots. That okay?"

"I think that's a great idea." She kissed me on the forehead. "Just don't tell anybody about all my dark secrets." She walked to the door and turned and smiled. "And by the way, I have another kind of trouble spot I'd like you to try and find later." She left with a wink.

I gulped as she swished down the hall.

When I'd collected myself again, I started scanning Delia's files. I couldn't help chuckling over the irony of devouring her Danish butter cookies at the same time I was destroying the "cookies" on her machine. She had dozens of the tiny files just from the forgery sites she visited. God, she was dedicated to her profession, working from home like that. And then there were the several dozen cookies from sites about sleeping pills. Most of them about Sleep-Knight, the brand Claire had used . . .

"Delia," I called. "Do you know what cookies are?"

She came to the doorway, flour on her hands and her cute little nose.

"I thought you were making something deliciously Italian?" I said, temporarily sidetracked.

"I'm multitasking." She blew stray hair out of her eyes and wiped her cheek with her forearm, grinning. "Is your blood sugar low? Because I could have sworn you just asked me if I know what cookies are."

I pointed at the computer screen. "I mean cookies on your computer."

"Did you turn the keyboard upside down and shake it? Do you need me to get the vacuum cleaner?"

I smiled and explained the relationship between cookies and Web sites to her.

"But you can get rid of them for me, can't you?" she asked.

"Oh yeah."

She blew me a kiss and turned to go. I stopped her with a question I needed to ask.

"Delia, did you have trouble sleeping? Before I moved in, I mean?"

A line of red crept up her neck and across her cheeks, and I knew she realized what I'd found.

"Oh, Sam," she said. "Oh no . . . when I . . . when you told me about Claire, I just . . . Sam, I was trying to understand what happened."

I stood up.

"It never occurred to me that you would find out," she said. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

I crossed to her quickly, wrapped my arms around her, and hugged her with all my strength. She felt warm, and soft, and good. What exactly had I been thinking a few moments before?

"I love you so much," I whispered in her ear.

"I love you too, Sam."

She brushed her lips against my cheek, and I felt the flick of her tongue on my earlobe. I inhaled the scent of her hair, her skin, and then something else.

"Wow, is that what I think it is?"

"Carbonara sauce? Um hmm. My best ever." She wriggled out of my arms. "Now let me go. I've got pasta on my mind."

"Oh, really?" I said. I was feeling a little *al dente* myself.

She gave me a playful push before heading back into the kitchen. I breathed in the aroma of basil and tomatoes mingling with the garlic and went back to cleaning up her old files and tossing things into the virtual trash can on her screen. Then I started on the trash can itself.

I never empty the trash on my own computer without looking through it first. Call me anal. Call me a tech nerd. Someday I might actually find something I hadn't meant to dump. So I was sorting Delia's trash when a folder caught my eye. It was labeled LETTERS.

Aha, I thought. Obviously the dark secrets she'd mentioned. Well, whatever it was, she might need them later, so I opened the file. Inside, I found two more files, one labeled C and the other labeled c.

C for Carmichael?

Curious, I opened the file, and a soft whistle escaped my lips. The

file contained a series of documents, all versions of Carmichael's suicide note.

I stood up and followed the scent of simmering sauce to the kitchen. Delia was at the stove, stirring her large stockpot.

"That smells wonderful."

She looked over at me and smiled.

"Thanks, Sam. No samples, though. You'll have to wait like a good . . . What is it? Are you okay?"

I shifted on my feet. "Uh, it's a bit delicate, actually."

"Delicate like my computer is ruined beyond repair, or delicate like the white chocolate sauce I'm going to whip up later? You know, I had to go to three different specialty shops to find just the right—"

Sweet Jesus. Her white chocolate sauce.

"It's about Carmichael," I started, and then stopped, wondering how she'd react to hearing his name. She didn't blink. I went on. "Did he use your computer? I mean, did you two share it?"

"No, never. Hand me that bowl of chopped tomatoes, will you, sugar?"

I passed her the bowl.

"I love this part," she said, scooping up a handful. "Hand squeezing is the secret. Mmm, yes, this is perfect."

I watched as the red juice and bits of pulp slipped through her fingers into the steaming pot.

"Why did you ask about Carmichael, Sam? Did he do something to break my computer?"

And suddenly I understood.

"No, honey, he didn't break your computer. It's okay, it's not important, I was just checking."

I managed a smile as I gave Delia a peck on the cheek and left her to work her magic. I walked back to the study, my anger at Carmichael rising. He'd used his own wife's computer to practice his suicide note. As if killing himself weren't going to be enough? He had to leave drafts of his vitriolic last letter on her computer for her to stumble across later? What else had he left behind to torment her?

Furious, I opened the C file. Inside were more letters, more drafts, and more recriminations. I found myself staring at the screen, my hands frozen above the keyboard. These were versions of Claire's note.

I sat for a minute longer, then forced myself out of the chair and back toward the kitchen. My heart was racing. I stopped in the hallway to catch my breath.

"Delia?"

She looked so damned beautiful with that spoon in her hand and I realized I had no idea what I was going to say. But something came out anyway.

"What do you do with computer files you don't want anymore?"

I smelled herbed croutons toasting in the oven. She put the spoon down and brushed leftover bread crumbs off the counter onto a cutting board.

"I delete them, my sweet. It's like a kitchen—clean as you go. No point having old files around."

She moved to the trash can and tipped the bread crumbs in, then put the cutting board back on the counter and opened the fridge. Radicchio, baby bibb, cos, Kalamata olives, and my favorite feta cheese appeared on the counter.

"You know, the secret to my Green Goddess salad dressing is the yogurt. I have a special Turkish store that I go to, down on—"

"Did the police look at your computer after Carmichael died?"

The bag of baby bibb fell to the floor.

"No, why would they?"

"No reason." I stooped to pick up the lettuce, put it back on the counter. "By the way, did you know that when you delete a file from your computer it isn't really gone? It's still there in that trashcan. Actually, even if it's gone from the trashcan, files and things can be retrieved if someone knows what he's doing. They're stored in compressed files on the hard disk and if you defragment your—"

A red onion rolled toward the edge of the counter.

"Well," Delia said, catching the onion before it dropped. "That's awfully technical sounding." She slipped on oven mitts and took the croutons out of the oven. They were golden cubes of perfection. She turned back to me with a devastating smile. "But my hero knows what he's doing. Don't you, Sam?"

To tell the truth, I wasn't sure I did. I wasn't sure of anything, right then, except for the deep fragrance of herbs and spices. They were almost overwhelming, but somehow I managed to croak an answer to Delia.

"I do."

I went back to the study and sat down. My head was spinning. I stared at the computer. It stared back.

Truth was, I was too confused to think at all, so I fell back on the muscle memory of job experience. As I said before, sometimes the only solution for a particularly pernicious computer problem is a total reformat. While I debated, now, how poisonous this problem was, Delia appeared in the doorway, an odd smile on her face. She was hiding something behind her back.

"Have you solved that little problem yet, Sam?"

"I believe I know what the problem is," I said carefully.

Delia nodded, her hands still out of sight.

"So," I started, and stopped. She raised her eyebrows at my hesitation. I cleared my throat and started again. "So I saved the files from your main work folder onto a CD. Is that everything you'll need off this computer?"

"And you'll 'disappear' the rest? Then I'm sure that's all I'll need. I'm so glad I have somebody who knows what he's doing, Sam."

Did I know what I was doing?

"Your appetizer is ready. Would you like to eat it in here?"

God, she was as cool as night. And as beautiful. A thought slashed in and out of my mind like lightning. *I can't bring Carmichael or Claire back.*

"Appetizer?" I whispered.

"Baby shrimp vol-au-vents with parsley sauce."

I think I groaned.

"Delia, honey, I . . ." I struggled for cogent words. I could smell the carbonara sauce, it was peaking and my brain was fogged.

"Or maybe," said Delia, coming into the room, "maybe that's not good enough for you."

She swooped toward me, startling me so that I pushed my chair backward, slamming it into the desk.

"Maybe you'd rather have this!" In a flash, she brought her hands from behind her back. She was holding a bottle of the 1993 Chateau Tombeuraux in her right hand. In her left she held two crystal wine glasses. She put them on the desk, then knelt down in front of me and took my hands in hers.

"But, how—"

"Shhh, Sam." She put a finger to my lips. "I told you. I have my ways. And I do it all for you."

"What?"

"Everything."

She smiled and glanced at the empty cookie plate still on the desk. Or was she looking at the computer? "Even the cookies. You don't think I would do all this just for myself, do you?"

My thoughts tumbled and I tried to focus on the only thing I was sure of. "Do you have the original installation software for your computer? For the programs, I mean."

Delia looked up and past me, to the shelf above the desk that held a series of software boxes. Then she squeezed my hands and fixed her eyes on mine.

"Everything you could possibly need or want is within reach, Sam. Everything."

I swallowed.

She stood and poured the wine. I sat still in my chair, staring straight ahead and trying to think.

Delia handed me my glass, and I took a sip, then a gulp. She bent down and kissed me and I could taste the wine mingling with the taste of pasta sauce and the incredible taste of Delia. She stood again, walked back to the doorway, and turned.

"I don't know what I would do without you, Sam. My very own hero, saving me from all those pesky cookies and things."

"Saving you? Hero?" My voice sounded far away.

"Ooh, and we're having real cookies for dessert," she said. "Godiva chocolate chip with English walnuts."

Oh my God.

"With that killer white chocolate sauce I was telling you about. You know, I think we should bring the leftover sauce into the bedroom with us later. Oh, the pastry!"

She blew me a kiss and she was gone.

I turned back to the desk, drained my glass, poured another, and pressed the necessary sequence of keys. Just like that, the computer was reformatting.

I emptied the glass in two more gulps, feeling the warmth all the way down. The wine was exquisite, as good as everybody said, and I was drinking it like corner store rotgut.

"Honey?" The wine had brought my voice back. "If you don't mind, I think maybe I will have that appetizer in—"

Delia came in as I was still talking and set a perfect, steaming vol-au-vent beside the mouse pad. I poured the last of the exquisite Tombeuraux. She squeezed my shoulder and took the empty bottle, saying something about opening the second. God, she'd found more than one.

I held up my glass, losing myself in the wine's delicate, intricate color as it danced in the light from the computer screen. I hovered my nose over the vol-au-vent, inhaled deeply, and felt a shudder run through me as the scent rushed into my soul.

The truth? Sometimes it's better if you just feel it, than if you actually try to know it. And sometimes that's easier than you think.

I reached up and took a stack of software boxes from the shelf. Truth was, I was going to be here for a while. ♀

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

New Mexico is home to a growing cadre of fine mystery writers who share a love of green chili and a respect for the diversity of climates, geography, and cultures that constitute the fabric of life there. Tony Hillerman's mysteries featuring Navajo tribal policemen Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee garner fans because of their cross-cultural insights, the depth of the characters, and the evocation of a landscape that is not only visually beautiful, but crucial to understanding the stories and the people in them. New regional voices are making strong inroads into Mr. Hillerman's territory—and Mr. Hillerman has been generous in his praise.

Michael McGarrity of Santa Fe is carving out his own niche with a multicultural cast of law enforcement officers who handle every kind of crime and criminal: rural, tribal or big city. *DEATH SONG* (Dutton, \$24.95) is his latest and although Santa Fe Police Chief Kevin Kerney gets top billing, this is definitely an ensemble series with many strong characters getting their chance to shine.

Death Song begins with a double bang—two murders that take place in two different jurisdictions: the killing of deputy sheriff Tim Riley in Lincoln County and the slaying of his wife, Denise, in Santa Fe. On top of that, the couple's eighteen-year-old son is missing. McGarrity handles the myriad jurisdictional forces and the potential for personal and personnel disputes in a way that reveals his own real life experience as a deputy sheriff in Santa Fe. From autopsies to computer technology to combined task forces, McGarrity lays it out clearly and convincingly. The result is a murder mystery that deepens as more and more information is revealed about the murdered couple, the deputy's estranged and missing son, and the additional victims the investigation encounters.

At the same time the personal stories of Police Chief Kevin Kerney and his associates also deepen. Kerney's wife Sara is a decorated veteran of the Iraq war still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Mescalero Apache Sergeant Clayton Istee of the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office is still coming to terms

with the discovery that Kerney is his biological father, and prodded by Sara and Istee's wife Grace, the two law officers are becoming better acquainted socially as circumstances bring them together professionally.

McGarrity has the whole package: a credible mystery, compelling characters, and a sense of place that encompasses the entire range of wilderness, rural, and urban areas of New Mexico.

Sandi Ault's memorable debut mystery *Wild Indigo* (2007) introduced Jamaica Wild, her wolf pup, Mountain, and other important characters who have returned in Ault's sophomore effort, *WILD INFERNO* (Berkley Prime Crime, \$23.95).

Wild, a resource protection agent for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Taos is a bit of a maverick: impetuous, headstrong, and fiercely passionate. In her debut appearance, Wild began learning about the lore and customs of the (fictional) Tanoah Pueblo Indians from Momma Anna, who senses great potential in Wild.

In *Wild Inferno*, Wild's education continues but this time she confronts not only a human killer but also nature's deadly force in the form of powerful wildfires. Wild travels to the Southern Ute territory near the famed Chimney Rock, where she has been called in to serve as the BLM's liaison officer for the team managing the fire fight.

Wild is immersed in the logistics of firefighting from the beginning, when she stumbles upon a seriously injured firefighter who can only murmur mysteriously, "save the grandmother," before he collapses. But another part of her job is dealing with the assemblage of Native Americans from thirteen tribes who have gathered at Chimney Rock for a sacred ceremony linked to a lunar event that occurs only once every 18.6 years.

Ault's description of the intense and intricate choreography involved in fighting wild fires comes as a revelation to any reader unfamiliar with them. Their vastness and unpredictability, not to mention the labor of donning an incredible load of protective gear and tools and trying to control the spread of the fires at ground level, require an incredible degree of bravery, caution, and dedication.

Ault's second mystery is even better than her first and at the end of it, Jamaica Wild is poised to enter a new phase of her career, which should leave readers eagerly awaiting the next chapter in this captivating series.

Pari Noskin Taichert's first two Sasha Solomon mysteries, *The Clovis Incident* (2004) and *The Belen Hitch* (2005), were both

nominated for Agatha awards. Her third, **THE SOCORRO BLAST** (University of New Mexico Press, \$24.95), may well generate a win as well as a nomination.

While McGarrity focuses his series on law enforcement officials and Ault's BLM agent focuses on the Native American populace of New Mexico, Taichert deals with another state minority: Jews.

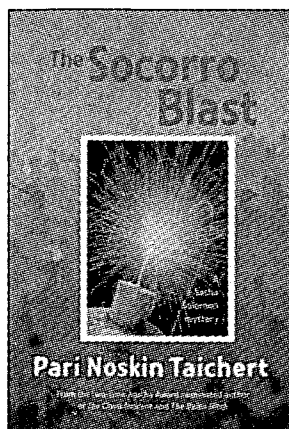
Sasha Solomon is a forty-one-year-old public relations expert anticipating a trip to Socorro to commence a consulting job for Socorro County. An added benefit is that she'll get to spend some time with her favorite niece, Gabi Shofet, a grad student at New Mexico Tech in Socorro.

But even before Sasha gets to Socorro, she learns that Gabi has been injured in an accident. The accident turns out to be an explosion, a pipe bomb rigged to detonate when Gabi opened her mailbox. Viewed as a prank, the mailbox explosion would be serious enough, but when Sasha discovers that Gabi's home has been vandalized with graffiti that plays on her Iranian heritage, she's ready to consider both events as a hate crime.

There is plenty of Jewish angst in this family where some members are strict Orthodox and others non-observant and the conflicts constant and exacerbated when they gather from their distant homes. The arrival of Gabi's super-observant sister, Daville, and her mother, Eva, ratchets up the family tensions. Taichert manages to leaven these disputes with humor, but the family divide is wide.

Sasha is not content with the police investigation, and as she did in previous adventures, she decides to do some sleuthing on her own. In addition, she is still trying to keep up with the demands of her consulting job, which is to help pull together the disparate tourist attractions of Socorro County under an umbrella marketing plan for a new visitor's center.

Readers will discover plenty about the range of Socorro County's attractions, including an old army outpost, Native American sites, and its Spanish heritage, while learning still more about Sasha's grit and sleuthing abilities and how her public relations skills lend themselves to an investigation.



IN SEARCH OF

WILL LUDWIGSEN

Your answers, though you might not like them:

The universe began 13.7 billion years ago as a singularity of infinite density and temperature. It will expand and fragment until the fragments become singularities of their own and repeat the process. The grand unified theory is a lot closer to "it's turtles all the way down" than scientists guess.

The Earth will end with a bang and not a whimper.

Life is common in the universe, but intelligent life is not. What little of it exists uses neither radio nor space travel. Four percent of Earth's species originated elsewhere, arriving via meteorite to evolve here. No one has ever been abducted by aliens.

No dead person has ever communicated with a living one. Ghosts are not the spirits of the dead but cross-consciousness memories to which sensitive minds have nonchronological access. The few true psychics have this ability, though only three percent of those who claim to be are. John Edward isn't. You are, slightly.

The creature in Loch Ness was a plesiosaur, but it died in 1976 and locals concealed the carcass. No feral simian or missing link has ever been photographed. The Mayas died of a pandemic hemorrhagic fever. Atlantis was the island of Crete.

All conceptions of God are produced by the limitations of human neuroses. A true holy book could fit on an index card, but most of the words on it haven't been invented yet. Religions are clumsy metaphors for epiphanous experiences, often the result of errant chemicals or electrical impulses. Sometimes, though, they illuminate the truth just as parallax calculates the distance to the stars.

Shakespeare's audiences wrote all the plays of Shakespeare: Their reactions shaped what actors remembered in each successive performance until they were finally written down. *The Voynich Manuscript* was an opium addict's dream journal.

Lizzie Borden did it, and her sister knew. Georg Jaffe, a Jewish immigrant tailor living in London's East End, performed the

killings ascribed to Jack the Ripper before lapsing into gibbering mental incompetence and dying of syphilis. Bruno Hauptmann didn't kidnap Charles Lindbergh Junior alone, but his accomplice had long since died when he went to trial. Arthur Leigh Allen was the Zodiac.

Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan lived four days on Gardner Island after ditching their plane there, eventually dying of thirst and exposure. U-869 was attempting to defect to the United States in February 1945 when it was sunk by U-857 off the coast of New Jersey. Marilyn Monroe died of an accidental reaction between medications prescribed by two different doctors.

D. B. Cooper's skull lies beneath seven feet of leaves and loam in a bear cave in the Cascades, along with one hundred forty-thousand dollars of his ransom money. British troops hid half a million pounds of bullion in the Oak Island money pit in 1779 and recovered it in 1781. Their commander ordered the pit restored as a punishment to "traitorous colonial Wretches too greedy to pay His Majesty's due."

Of course O. J. did it.

President Kennedy was shot nonfatally by Lee Harvey Oswald but then killed accidentally by a Secret Service agent. Flushed with adrenaline, the agent slipped off the curb while rushing to the limousine with his weapon drawn. Because Oswald fired the initiating shot, the FBI, CIA, and Treasury Department felt justified in leading all investigations to him.

After the September 11 attacks, Al Qaeda never again had the capability to execute an attack of similar magnitude. Osama bin Laden was horribly disfigured by a thermobaric bomb blast at Tora Bora in late 2001.

Two and a half million years ago, one of your ancestors invented the spoon. You had a relative who fought at Actium. Your great-great grandmother shook Abraham Lincoln's hand and reported it was "clammy." Bernard Theerian remembered the chocolate bar your grandfather gave him in Paris on August 29, 1944, as the best he tasted all his life.

Your parents did indeed meet at church, but only after your father locked your mother in the Sunday School room and charged her a kiss to let her escape. Years later, your mother only relented to his charms for rides along the seashore in his new white MG.

Your father wanted to be an architect but stopped trying after a rejection from the Rhode Island School of Design. He majored in sociology instead because everybody was hoping to change the world back then. He drew houses on napkins the rest of his life.

Your mother wanted to be a botanist but flunked organic chemistry.

Neither wanted children.

Theresa never wanted to be your big sister, and she resented your parents for making her raise you. Once while babysitting, she prayed tearfully that you'd just die. She felt terrible about it for the rest of her life.

Buddy forgave you for yanking his ears that time in the pool. A boy named Damon Phillips stole your bicycle in the fourth grade, but he took better care of it. The angry old man living across the street wasn't a Nazi but a Russian; he did poison Pippi for sniffing around in his garden, though. The fat girl at your summer camp killed herself the next fall.

Your parents knew that you borrowed the magazines they kept under their bed.

Heather Duncan would certainly have gone to the ninth grade dance with you. That gangly hick with the bad mustache who spit tobacco on you at the pep rally is on death row. You could have gotten another hundred points on the SAT if your mother had breast fed you in your infancy.

Your guidance counselor confused you with another student when she advised you to work toward an exciting career in computers. You would have been terrible at it if you'd tried. Careers for which you were better suited were counselor, attorney, or teacher.

Theresa would also have been an excellent teacher. Her last memories were of spooking her little brother while watching episodes of *In Search Of* together in the basement.

Your teachers didn't know how to help you, after. Mr. Bailey didn't realize that the D in physics would ruin your university scholarship. Dean Findley thought a military school would help, but your parents couldn't afford it. Everybody knew you broke the office windows.

Meeting Lieutenant Vercek at the career fair saved your life.

Over the course of your career in Homicide, your work resulted in the arrests of six hundred and twenty people. Two hundred and fifty-four were guilty but exonerated. Ninety-six were innocent but convicted anyway. Of those, forty-four were guilty of other crimes. Only thirty-one percent served their entire terms in prison. Of those released, more than half killed again.

Jacques Hermann didn't kill those girls. You were right that Vernon Gene Johnson hid Sandy Berensen within view of the nursery window. Her body was floating about three hundred yards away in an old septic tank, and finding it would have cinched the

case. Ervin Mitchell kept the photos of his rapes under the carpet in his father's doughnut truck for which you never got a warrant. Those garbled tapes discovered in Francis Shenck's cabin were recordings of his victims' tortured screams for his later fantasies. Gary Thorton still wants to eat you.

You arrested more black men than any other race or gender, but you couldn't help it.

Two people vowed to kill you over the course of your life. Neither could have done it. Francis Shenck's daughter was a terrible shot, and Gavin Drummond forgot after the third grade.

Sharon's parents never liked you as much as they did her last boyfriend. They took them both to dinner when you divorced. She is happy now, but she doesn't regret marrying you. Sometimes she misses those lazy summer naps and midnight trips to Krispy Kreme.

Your daughter lost her virginity in your favorite chair with that dorky drum major. She made him wear his hat. Your boss's boss thinks your last name is Gilbert. That UFO you saw in the mountains was a Russian satellite burning up on reentry. The creepy man you saw at Disney World wasn't a child molester.

The man at whom you shot the bird for cutting you off in traffic on December 16, 1996, was on the way to his wedding. The dent in your rear fender from August 2001 was inflicted by an uninsured college student who couldn't afford to repair the damage. Six times in your life you have eaten fast-food tainted with the body fluids of bitter service employees.

Sixteen across on the *USA Today* crossword puzzle from August 3, 1991, was "ibex." All your mother really wanted for Christmas was a subscription to *Vanity Fair* instead of all those cheese platters. You routinely used the word "flammable" when you meant to say "inflammable."

No one could ever love you enough, but Jennifer Harris came the closest. She still thinks about you and your kiss beneath the pier on prom night.

Your greatest strength is your desire to ask all the big questions. Your greatest weakness is your fear of asking the little ones.

Theresa lies face down in a grave near the 165-mile marker on Interstate 95 in South Carolina. Her murderer, a councilman for nearby Florence, chuckles when he drives his Cadillac Escalade past her grave. His only motive was convenience, and there was no way to catch him.

Nothing you've done would disappoint her. ♡

UNDER SAPPARN PUT

MITHRAN SOMASUNDRUM

My chief occupation that afternoon had been connecting paper clips while watching Doi fan herself with the current issue of *Thai Rath*. It was the height of the hot season, a week away from the Songkran Festival, and translation requests had dried up right along with the leaves on Chinatown's sparse trees. The other side of my business, the private detective side of things, was equally stalled. Maybe it was the weather. Bangkok was too hot for lawbreaking.

The clanking metal fan in the corner of our small office swept out a breeze that was too warm to help. Doi sighed and wondered aloud when we'd be able to afford air-conditioning. At that point the door jerked open and Doi's sister, Lieng, stuck her head in. "Not busy," she said, more as a statement than a question, and sat herself down and began.

The problem was work; the problem was Oot. Lieng's husband ran a car repair shop on the Thonburi side of the river. Doi had told me once she suspected business wasn't too good, but hadn't known the details. Now Lieng was hammering in the small print. Did we have any idea what the mechanics were like? Did we know what they got up to? Take yesterday. They should have been raising the suspension on a pickup. Only she goes into the back and guess what? They've got that portable TV on, and they're placing bets on the boxing. Could we imagine? And where was Oot during all of this? Where did we think? Stuck in the office with his cronies from Sanam Luang, trading his bloody amulets.

She gave us both a dirty look at that point. Sanam Luang isn't far from Chinatown. It was as though she was holding us responsible.

The funny thing was, I did actually find the amulet business interesting, albeit in a completely nonreligious way. Sometimes on a late Sunday afternoon when I had nothing better to do, I'd wander around the market by Maharat Pier, which is another big amulet-trading area. I suppose what I liked was the whole subculture, the



mats on the pavement with thumb-sized Buddha images laid out in rows and the old men on stools guarding them like grandchildren. I liked watching the intense jewelers' eyeglass examinations, and I liked the patience of the old men. It all seemed so timeless and peaceful.

Each temple produces its own style, and particular amulets are valued because they were blessed by particularly devout monks. As reputations rise, so do prices. In terms of a hobby, it's somewhere between stamp collecting and playing the stock market (if you can imagine the stocks also protecting you from evil). Only the problem in this case was Oot treating it as more than just a hobby. He'd apparently forgotten about his garage.

"You know a fortnight ago he was gone the whole week? I phoned and he's at Sanam Luang. He thinks one day he's going to make some big deal," Lieng complained. "Always he's been like this. He won't work. He wants a shortcut."

It was another half hour before she'd left. Afterward, Doi sighed and said, "You're lucky your family are all in England, Vijay." By that time it was four thirty. It probably wouldn't kill us to close early for once, but then you never knew when a client might come in. So I waited for another hour and no one showed. Still, as I told Doi when we headed out, things were bound to pick up soon. Which was true enough because the next day we did get a customer.

The strange thing was, it was Oot.

When he lumbered in and placed his bearlike body on the chair in front of Doi, I was sure we were going to get the rebuttal. But instead he turned to me and said mournfully, "I think I'm being followed."

I sat up straight. "Why would you think that?"

"When I go to the shops, when I come home, there's always the same car. Silver Honda Civic."

"Oot," I said, "this city is full of Honda Civics, they're probably the most popular saloon car on the road. And silver's the most common color."

He shook his head. "I'm a mechanic, I notice cars. Crack on the right side headlight. Little dent on the left side wing mirror, line of blue paint. So I write down the license plate. It's the same car. I'm seeing for four days now."

"Why do you think someone would follow you?"

Oot winced. In the small wooden chair, with his sloped shoulders and his sad, jowly face, he looked more than ever like a big, exhausted bear. You felt he was going to trudge off somewhere and hibernate. Instead, he said, "I think there's two reasons. The

first is Lieng. Maybe she hire someone like you." He peered at me. "Or she hire you. Are you following me?"

"No, of course not. And I don't own a Honda Civic. Or have access to one."

From behind him, Doi said in Thai, "Oot, Lieng's not going to have you followed. Why would she do that?"

"She's not happy," Oot said. "I can tell."

Doi and I exchanged glances. It didn't seem right somehow to tell him about his wife's visit. Her complaints were all things she needed to say to him directly, not via a third party.

I said, "Let's just assume it's not her."

His hand scrabbled under the neck of his yellow T-shirt and brought out a gold-chained amulet. "In that case, it's this." He leaned toward me so I could see the Buddha inside the glass disc more clearly. "From Chang Hai temple," he said. "The period of Luang Por Tuat." I heard a sharp intake of breath from Doi. To me the name meant nothing. She read my blank expression and said, "Vijay, it's a very good monk. He live long ago. The time of Rama Five. Was a very powerful person, could turn saltwater into fresh. Don't look like that, it's true."

"By doing what?"

"With his feet. Just stand in the sea and pray, and people can drink." She flapped her wrist at me. "You're not a Buddhist, you don't know about these things."

"So I take it this is valuable?" Oot nodded. "How much?"

"Maybe . . . five *san*."*

"Bloody hell. Oot, you're not a Mafia kingpin. You do not want to be walking around this city with half a million *baht*'s worth of Buddha around your neck."

"I know, I know. But I don't have a safe place for keeping. Plus, someone's following me. The Luang Por Tuat Buddha can protect. Even from bullets."

"But I thought you said that's why they were following you?"

Oot nodded. "Probably."

God save us all from an amulet trader's logic. "Okay, so the point is, these mystery people in the Honda seem to know you've got a valuable— Actually, how *did* you get it?"

"I buy at Sapparn Put. The night market."

"They sell amulets there?" It was the first I'd heard of it. Sapparn Put is one of the bridges over the Chao Phrya. The market appears every weekday evening on the streets below and around the bridge, running from seven till midnight.

"I didn't expect. Was only looking for clothes and then I saw

them. He have just a few on a mat and when I look I can't believe. Plus, he doesn't know a proper price. He selling to me for three *san*. I say to save it and I come back the next day. That was five days ago. Now for four days someone's following."

"And you're convinced it's because of this? There's no other reason you can think of?"

He gave me a lost look of imprisonment. "I'm a poor man. Why else they follow?"

The answer carried a question of its own. "So Oot, um, where exactly did you get three *san*?"

"I borrow from the bank. Put up the shop as security." He turned to Doi and said in Thai, "I don't want Lieng to know about this."

"*Chai*," said Doi, although from her steely tone you couldn't tell whether she meant, "yes I'm not going to tell her," or "yes, you don't want her to know."

Oot rotated his bulk back to me and said, "But it's okay, I find someone to buy. He's a rich man. Work about construction. He's going to pay five *san* in cash, but he need time to get the money." So not that rich, then. "Can make a big profit, but . . . there's this car now."

"Well, for a start, if you can give me the license plate number, I can find out who's driving it. Apart from that, who else knows you have this Buddha? I'm guessing you advertised somewhere?"

Oot shook his head. "I was careful, only speak to one person, a real dealer. He make sure it's Luang Por Tuat period, and then he announce to a few regular customers. But he don't say who's selling, don't say my name. Everything's very quiet. Very careful."

And yet this Honda had turned up. It made me think of a shark smelling blood in the water miles away.

"Okay, so in the meantime you can keep the Buddha in our office safe. I'll write you a receipt. Basically, we have to look after the thing until it becomes your buyer's problem." Oot took out his wallet, but I didn't have the heart to charge him. "Forget it, you're not hiring me. I'm just helping."

Before he left, with another worried query about us telling Lieng, he wrote out the license plate number on the back of a business card. I sat tamping it down on the desk after he'd gone. Doi said, "Vijay, are you going to phone Mana?" This was a police captain friend who worked in Chinatown. She made a face. "I . . . *kreng jai*,* you know? I don't like to keep bothering him."

"What I really want to do," I said, "is visit Sapparn Put again."

The place meanders into a large flower market called Talat Pak

Klong. Back in the days when I was trying to hold on to a high-maintenance girlfriend, I used to buy her roses there after work and then stroll around Sapparn Put looking at the T-shirts. It didn't help. She eventually left me for a Chinese-Thai guy who had his own business exporting rambutans to the United States. He drove a BMW, and I doubt he had to go to night markets to get his flowers.

Walking up from the bus stop, I found everything I remembered—the unmoneyed young in laughing groups, girls with inexpensive lipstick and hot pants, pirated DVDs in wire baskets, an unshaven older guy whispering *yaa baa* (amphetamines) to anyone who looked plausible. The stalls at Sapparn Put are metal poles draped with plastic awnings, and when they go up, the pavement space all but disappears, sending the crush of people spilling out into the road, where the motorbikes and the constantly revving *tuk-tuks** weave around them. The clothes were hung from the poles or piled high on trestle tables and were as cheap as ever. In some cases this was because they were factory rejects, but in most it was because they were secondhand. I wondered if Oot shopped here as a necessity. If so, it was probably that necessity which had led him to amulets in the first place. In fact, perhaps open-sky hope is a factor for any collector—to reach your hand into the jumble and pluck out amazing good luck. And to be fair to the guy, he'd actually done that.

Away from the stalls on the pavement there was a fenced-off concrete apron where some kids were playing *takraw*, a piece of string strung across for the net. It was here I found the amulet seller. A sour-looking old man in a metal folding chair, he'd put his mat down by the fence. He had no lighting of his own, but was reached dimly by the sodium lamps on the road above. I saw he didn't have a huge number of Buddhas to offer. And then as I went over, I began to notice the crowd.

I'm used to tracking philandering spouses through air-conditioned shopping malls, so I know how to hang around and kill time. And now I knew from practice there were two men keeping the amulet seller under surveillance. I placed both in their late twenties. They were stationed at stalls equidistant from the *takraw* game and were doing equally poor jobs of appearing interested in the clothes in front of them. The one nearest to me—goatee beard, single earring, wiry build—was lifting a T-shirt from a rack without even looking at it. His attention was all on the people filing past him and on the crowd browsing the Buddhas. The man on the far side was of a bigger build and looked Chinese-Thai. Likewise, he

was fingering a pair of jeans with no real interest.

I let the flow of the shoppers take me past the old man without even glancing at him.

"Vijay, whenever you ask for a license plate check I know you're not working on a divorce," Mana said.

I thought of Oot and Lieng—not yet, anyway.

"That's it, I'm not."

"So . . ."

"It's nothing dangerous. And nothing within Chinatown."

A sigh came down the line. "Okay, you don't want to tell me about it." I could hear the sound of him pressing keys, so hopefully he was helping us anyway.

"You know how it is, I have to keep the client's confidentiality." From behind her desk, Doi made a face—Oot wasn't actually paying us, so technically he wasn't a client. "If I ever hear someone is planning to knock off a gold shop around here, I promise you'll be the first to know."

Doi leaned across her desk and whispered, "Vijay, you think we use him too much?" I waved away her objection. Over the phone, Mana said, "Vijay, I think you use me too much."

"You know, I really appreciate this."

"Humpf."

I put the phone against my chest and said to Doi, "He says it's fine."

"Who says it's fine?" asked Mana when I brought the phone back to my ear.

"The client. He's pleased with how it's going."

"What he's pleased about?" asked Doi. "Lieng says they don't have any business."

"I mean the investigation. He's pleased with how it's progressing."

"I thought you told me you'd only just started?" said Mana. "Strange client you've got."

"That's why I'm waiting to find out who owns this bleeding Honda."

"Okay, here. Get a pen. The name is Parrista Nivatpumin. She lives on Thanon Charoen Krung, Soi 44, number 503. And her year of birth is 2522, so that makes her . . ."

"Twenty-eight," I said, thinking again how science-fictional the Buddhist calendar made everything sound.

I didn't want to end up simply following the Honda as it followed Oot, so I phoned and told him that tomorrow, unless something life- or business-threatening came up, he should stay put.

Then I checked with Doi's husband, Tor, about borrowing his car, a fifteen-year-old Peugeot 205. He always handed it over with good grace, but since Doi gave him little choice in the matter, I always felt guilty about asking.

When I drove off that evening, I found it was still running smoothly. Which wasn't surprising, since Oot worked on it for free. And now I was working for him for free. And Mana helped me for free.

No wonder we were all broke.

The next morning I left the house at five A.M., with a can of Birdy ice-coffee and a packet of Oreos on the seat next to me. I wanted to make sure I reached Charoen Krung before rush hour hit. Running parallel to the river for something like four kilometers, with the financial districts of Silom and Sathorn Road meeting it in the middle, the road is a stream of dusty, exhausted metal at the best of times.

As it happened, I reached Soi 44 at five thirty-five A.M.—earlier than I expected, and when I turned into the tight cul-de-sac it was still dark. Around me were the mostly unlit windows of narrow terrace houses, each with a metal gate padlocked across a small concrete yard. For some houses a car was parked here, where as for others the yard was a place to store household junk and the car was out on the street. That was the case for, the silver Honda, which I spotted first from its cracked headlight. I pulled up some way behind it and then turned the Peugeot around so that I was facing the mouth of the *soi*. Then I settled down to wait, relying on the mixture of caffeine and glucose to keep me awake.

When I eventually quit this job and become a translator full-time—which I'm going to do soon—I will start each day with a healthy feast: sweetly ripe yellow mangoes, deluxe Swiss muesli with lots of raisins, thick-cut marmalade on whole wheat toast, soft scrambled eggs on cinnamon bagels. . . . As I sat in the car I invented an ever-expanding menu, and gradually the sky lightened and the *soi* came to life. Metal gates rattled open as people left for work. Stray dogs slunk in, sniffing for rubbish that hadn't made it to the bins. A man on a motorbike pattered by, his panniers packed with newspapers to deliver.

There was no movement from 503 though. I reached the fiery heat of mid morning without a sign of life. Finally, I had to edge down the windows to breathe inside the suffocating smell of hot plastic. It became a sort of drawn-out pain, watching the blank front of a house at which nothing happened, and my attention wandered. I only became aware of the bulky Thai man when he leaned on her bell.

I took in broad shoulders under his white T-shirt and the back of a head shaved almost to baldness. He rang once, stepped back, and craned his head up. Then he leaned into the bell with the heel of his palm and stayed there. Faintly, from inside the house, I could hear the unbroken buzz.

Eventually, a woman marched out, tucking a black blouse into a gray pencil skirt. In perhaps her late twenties, she had a weak chin and long black hair swept back from a broad forehead. You wouldn't say she was beautiful, but it was a striking, stylish face, even when tightened by anger, as it was now.

She dragged the gate open and tried to step forward, but her visitor didn't move back. He held his palm out, while Parrista (presumably) stood just inside her yard, fists on her hips. Certainly the man's size didn't intimidate her, though I noticed she didn't want to look him in the face for some reason: She spoke angrily to one thick shoulder and then slammed something into that waiting palm. The man sauntered over to the Honda and unlocked it, the right side of his face in profile. I realized the argument was about him wanting the car keys.

When he pulled away, I chose the car over the woman. I waited and then tucked in behind, as the Honda turned right onto Charoen Krung and then headed up Sathorn Road. He entered Soi 3, a lane of narrow pavements where the high walls enclose condominiums with swimming pools, huge old-money houses, and in one case, a French restaurant called Les Nymphae. This was where the Honda turned in. I followed it onto a loose-gravel driveway that led to a parking bay behind the building. From the far end of the bay I watched the Honda park and the man lumber out. He made for a door labeled STAFF ONLY, and this time I got the left side of his face in profile. It was clumsily bisected by a scar that ran from the bridge of his nose, across his cheek, to the hinge of his jaw. I sat in my car, thinking up ways he could have gotten it.

The restaurant was a high-ceilinged colonial-style building, a type that hardly exists in Bangkok anymore. Ice-cream white with sky blue wooden shutters pulled back from its long windows, it had somehow survived in this tucked-away corner. When I got out of the car and peered in, I found I was looking at a determined retention of the 1950s. The mahogany-paneled walls with their framed sepia-toned photos and elegant brass lamps should by rights have been permeated with Parisian cigarette smoke. Waiters in white jackets laid down dishes on starched white tablecloths. In fact, the only thing out of place were the diners themselves. The young Japanese girl with her spiky hair and goth makeup, that

Western man with his Bermuda shorts and his chunky, sunburned knees, the freckled woman with the Ray-Bans and the camcorder on the table. The tourists had brought the new century with them.

And then, as the woman shifted the camcorder to make space for a wine bottle, I realized I knew the man who was serving her. The earring had gone, but the goatee beard was still there. I'd last seen him running surveillance at Sapparn Put.

I couldn't, however, see any sign of Scarface, which probably meant he worked in the kitchen. Perhaps the management didn't want him scaring away the customers. I heard a foot displacing gravel and understood this was only part of the reason. The rest of it was the fact that he was standing behind me.

He was still in his street clothes—jeans and the white T-shirt pushed out of shape by his solid belly. Seen frontways on, the scar was even more arresting. It ruined the left side of his face, while the right side, taken on its own, gave him the smooth, unmarked look of an oversized child.

"You follow me," he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I see your car in the *soi*." He gave a thin smile. "I see you before you see me."

"I came for lunch. What does your employer think about you hassling his guests?" The right side of his face softly absorbed this news while the left side scowled at me. It was like getting the good cop-bad cop treatment all at once from the same person. He widened his stance and tucked his thumbs into his belt, which made him seem even more coplike. "I think you want to come with me."

"I'm not going anywhere."

He took out a mobile and texted something. Inside the restaurant, Goatee Beard came back into view holding a mobile of his own. He spotted us through the window, gave a brief nod, and turned and left. "He's coming also," said Scarface, and gave me a smile of either innocence or malice, depending on which side of his face you were focusing on. "We go back to the garage. Say hello to amulet man." He added, "You see, I knew you want to come."

While we waited for his friend, I thought about Goatee Beard and then about Parrista—the eyes, the broad forehead, the weak chin that a goatee didn't really help.

"So, is his sister getting tired of lending her car? Or does she just not like what you're up to?" I asked.

The surprise registered on the unmarked side of his face, and then he said, "Why you care?"

Now that he was off balance I wanted to take the initiative. "We're not going to the garage, we're going to my office."

He gave me a spectacularly lopsided sneer. "You think so?"

"The thing you want is in my safe. Oot, the man from the garage, will meet us there."

He thought about it. "Where your office?"

"Chinatown. On Yaowarat Road. I'll drive slowly and you can follow. Don't worry, I won't lose you."

He gave me his yin-yang smile again. "You not a good driver. You don't lose me even if you try."

I pulled out of the *soi* onto Sathorn Road and checked my rearview mirror for the Honda. Having made sure it was there, I phoned Oot. He must have been sitting with the mobile by his hand because he picked up instantly. "Oot, I've got a question about your dealer friend. Can you trust him?"

"Yes, of course. Vijay, he's a good person. He teach me about the Buddhas, which one to buy, which one not. And he introduce me to some of his customers. Help me very much."

"It's just that only a tiny number of people knew you had this amulet. Everyone needs money, Oot."

"Not him. Khun Monchai is very rich. Live in a big condo on Sukumvit Road. He don't deal for the money, only for his interest."

"You know he's rich or he just says he is?"

"Vijay, I know. Whenever we meet he take me for lunch in the city. Have a big meal and he always pay. He very *jai dee*."* Oot giggled. "And you know, I don't even like French food so much. But he enjoy, so I don't want to say."

Oh good grief. "Oot, what restaurant do you go to?"

"Very expensive. On Sathorn Road—"

"Called Les Nymphae?"

"You know it?"

"Oot, I want you to meet me at my office. We're going to have a chat with some people about the Luang Por Tuat Buddha."

"People in the Honda?"

"Correct." I waited and a sigh came down the line. He sounded weary and accepting. "Okay, I come." After I shut the phone I debated calling Mana. It would be the safe thing to do, play the percentages, as they say. But then if I had the right hunch about what was going on, it was better not to have the police involved. I fumbled the phone back into my trouser pocket and wondered if I had the right hunch.

As it turned out, when I got to my office there was a further problem. The heavy traffic on Sathorn had led to Oot getting there before me. No big deal in itself, except in this case Lieng had already been ensconced, complaining to Doi. When I entered, three pairs of eyes regarded me with a combination of reproach, hostility, and warning. "Vijay, why you don't tell me Oot hire you?" Lieng wanted to know.

"Yes, Vijay, why you don't tell us?" Doi asked from behind her desk, and then gave me nod that seemed to say, "run with it."

Oot gave me a look that said, "Why didn't you tell me she's here?"

"He hasn't hired me as such; I'm just advising."

"Three *san*," said Lieng. "And he put up the shop as security." The two of them were sitting in front of Doi's desk, Lieng glaring at Oot, and Oot staring glumly at the wall's flaked plaster.

My desk was at right angles to Doi's and back up against the window. Behind the ell where the desks met was the office safe. I looked at it and, hearing footsteps on the stairs, thought about the Luang Por Tuat protecting you from bullets. Then Scarface came in and peered about him, looking half threatening and half startled. Goatee Beard was behind. He jerked his thumb at the two women and asked, "Who are they?"

"They?" asked Lieng. "Who are you?"

I wheeled my chair out and said, "One of you can sit in this." Then I perched on my desk and regarded them all. "We're going to have a chat about the Luang Por Tuat Buddha."

"What it's to do with them?" Lieng asked.

"What it's to do with you?" countered Scarface.

"She's his wife," I said. Why don't one of you take a seat?" They were both still standing, arms crossed.

"We waiting for someone," said Scarface.

"In that case, let's talk."

At that point there were more footsteps on the stairs.

"How it's their business?" asked Lieng. She tried out a scowl at Scarface and then looked away, disconcerted.

The door opened and the old man from Sapparn Put shuffled in, looking as sour as before. "Need to fix the lift," he said. Without prompting, he took the vacant chair and once seated, adjusted the creases of his trousers with great care. His assistants stood one at each shoulder, as though posing for a Victorian family portrait. The old man gave the office a look of general contempt and then said, "Translator-Detective? You can't decide?"

"I'm playing the percentages." I added to Lieng and Doi, "This is the man who sold Oot the Buddha."

"Then he can take it back," said Lieng firmly.

The old man turned his head in slow increments. He hadn't deigned to acknowledge her existence up to now. With a thin abbreviation of a smile, he allowed her the right to an opinion. "Of course," he said.

"You'll take it? Oot, that's settled," she told her husband.

"I've already found a buyer," said Oot, still peering at the cracked wall as though his future was written there.

"But we don't know when he can get the money. We have to pay the bank."

"Exactly," said the old man. "Listen to your wife." He pointed to the safe. "It's in there? Can I see?"

"Not yet," I told him. "Oot?"

"We make a profit." He dragged his attention away from the wall, finally. "Lieng, he's buying for five *san*."

She told the old man, "We'll keep it."

Again the abbreviated smile. He was maddeningly sure of himself. "I don't think so. You can't sell this, you don't know anything about Buddhas. If not for your dealer friend you wouldn't even know what it was worth."

"What dealer friend?" asked Lieng

"Khun Monchai," said Oot.

"It's his property now," I said. "It's his risk."

"Khun who?"

"If you sold it cheaply, too bad. You don't have any claim on it now," I said.

"Have I met him?"

The old man slammed his fist down on the armrest and glared at Oot. "He cheat me. I asked him for five *san* and he said he couldn't afford. So I sold for three because I'm a kind person and this is what he does. It's not fair!" It was a child's tantrum, but coming from that aged face it became threatening. You felt this man had a lifetime's experience of getting what he shouted for.

"If you've sold it already, it's too late," said Lieng.

"You think I can't make trouble for you?" he asked. "You think I don't know Bang Khlo? I knew that place when it was *klongs** and coconut trees. I talk to people there and no one visits your garage again."

"Before you start making threats," I said, "you should think about what I could do to you."

That received a sneer. "You think?"

"Why not? It's pretty obvious what your operation is. I used to be a regular at Sapparn Put, but I've never seen anyone selling

Buddhas there. And you know why? Because honest, law-abiding people sell them in daylight, or in well-lit shops. Not at night, fifteen feet below a sodium lamp. And that's not to mention him—" I pointed at Goatee Beard. "—and another guy watching out for cops. You're selling fakes, or thought you were. That's why you let Oot beat you down. It's quite ironic really, isn't it? If you'd been doing this under natural light you might have realized you'd got your hands on the real thing." From inside the tight skull of a face, the eyes glittered at me. "One of my friends is a police captain here. If you want to start getting visits from plainclothes cops, that's your lookout. Not their jurisdiction, I know. But believe me, they can still give you plenty of trouble."

"And what about you? You think I can't give you trouble? You have a work permit? You want to stay in our country?" His dry claw of a hand curled into a fist. He hammered down on the armrest again. "He cheat me. I have a real Buddha and he cheat me." And this from a man selling fakes! He switched into Thai and said, "You think you can cross me? People like you? You're failures and you know it. He's a failed mechanic and you're a failed translator." He turned to Doi and said, "Why do you stay with the *keak*?" What's the matter with you? Can't type? Can't spell?" Doi glowered at him without replying. He turned back and jerked his thumb at her. "And she's a failed secretary. There are millions like you in this city, millions. You have no idea about business. You have no idea about life. You try and annoy me, you have any idea what I will do to you?"

For a moment no one spoke—he'd sucked the oxygen out of the room. And then Lieng said, "We're not frightened of you." She turned to her husband, but Oot had taken on that lost look of imprisonment again. He said quietly, "Okay, I sell."

"Oot!"

And then he raised his head: He wasn't completely beaten. "I sell for four *san*."

"Oot," cried Lieng, "You don't have to sell for anything."

I could see the old man considering. I told him, "If that's not a good enough offer you can leave now."

He gave me another look of contempt. It wasn't in his nature to win graciously. "You show me the Buddha first." I let him examine it and then stuck it back in the safe. The man asked for Oot's account number and said he'd transfer the money at an ATM. "I'm not the kind of fool who brings such an amount in person," he said, which I presumed was a dig at Oot for returning to Sapparn Put with three *san* in his pocket. Even though,

presumably, the old man had insisted on cash in the first place.

After he'd trooped off with his henchmen, Scarface still looking both blank and furious, Lieng said, "Oot, why can't you stand up for yourself for once? That's one *san* profit we've lost."

"It doesn't matter," said Doi. "It's done now."

Before things could go any further, I said, "Oot, when I was driving back here there was a knocking sound from the engine. Can you take a look?"

"Tor didn't tell me," said Doi.

"It just started."

Down on the pavement, Oot stood by the car, waiting for me to hand him the keys. Instead, I said, "That Buddha really is a fake, isn't it?" He gave me his slow, hibernating expression, but I wasn't buying it this time. I realized a bear was the wrong comparison for Oot. An iceberg would be a better one—moving in invisible increments and three-quarters hidden. I said, "Everything I worked out at Sapparn Put you worked out for yourself when you first went there. Not five days ago but the week before. Lieng said you were gone for all of that week. That's when you were scoping this out, following each of them in turn. And doing a better job than me, it's got to be said. The breakthrough was the restaurant, wasn't it? Lieng hadn't heard of Khun Monchai because he doesn't exist. He's a wish fulfillment, this rich dealer on Sukumvit who shares his contacts. You went there with one of your friends from Sanam Luang and acted out the whole it's-a-real-Picasso scene while that guy with the beard was filling your glasses. It was a gamble all right, but what the hell, he bit."

Oot smiled and said, "And what *they* can tell the police? I sell them the fake they sell me?"

"Never mind the police, what about what they can do to you?"

He waved his hand. "Vijay, it's all bluff. That old man don't know big people. If he does, you think he's selling fake Buddhas from a mat in a night market? He talk good, but I follow him for two days, I see how he live. Only thing is, I needed someone with a safe. And I think, maybe he bring a gun."

"Brilliant. What was I supposed to do if he had a gun?"

He blinked. "You're a detective."

"Oot, you're playing with fire. You know that, don't you?"

"Vijay, my last job I raise the suspension on a pickup. They pay me six thousand *baht*. Parts cost five thousand. Have to pay two mechanics each three hundred. It's only four hundred for me. Never become rich like this. Always it's a fight. And Lieng, she's not happy."

"I don't think the problem's money. I think she'd be happier if you gave her more attention." I raised my hands. "Okay, okay, I know. Marital advice from the single guy. But still."

Oot said, "If you want a better life, sometimes you need to be fast," and then he opened his eyes wide. He was looking past me, peering out at the bustle of Chinatown, at the gold shops and the heat-exhausted crowds and the trays of lottery tickets at the edge of the road and the motorbikes weaving through the hysterical traffic, at the dismaying rush of money, which was all around us and everywhere. ♣

Solution to the May "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Window
B. Imminent
C. Night Watch
D. Database
E. Ornate
F. Leather
G. Finish
H. Spectator

I. Overstate
J. Universe
K. Neighborly
L. Doses
M. Terrible
N. Repairs
O. Admires
P. Constant
Q. Kit Carson

R. Fascinate
S. Oglethorpe
T. Rhetoric
U. Messenger
V. Underway
W. Remember
X. Dandiest
Y. Easy street
Z. Rhinoceros

QUOTATION

Author—(Jim) WINDOLF

Work—SOUNDTRACK FOR MURDER, *New York Times*,
July 2, 2006

"Peter Robinson's . . . mysteries aren't cool. The crime-scene descriptions are straightforward . . . Robinson . . . gives death its due, which makes a nice starting point for his . . . tales. He never . . . lets on that a murder mystery is an elaborate con game . . . between writer and reader."

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 77.
The solution to the puzzle will appear in the July/August issue.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. 1969 Academy Award winner: 2 wds.	121	3	43	31	117	188	146	143	62
B. Teaser's activity	90	84	55	78	33	158	5		
C. New bedroom, perhaps	114	54	106	73	147	29	22	185	
D. Mere diversion or pleasure	37	130	180	63	95	41			
E. — suit, island must	107	10	154	165	49	119	128		
F. Discarded	141	161	86	194	186	68	35		
G. Trial proposal	88	69	110	156	60	142	164	36	129 11
H. P.J. O'Rourke's forte	25	102	189	171	82	108	137		
I. Rotating Tray: 2 wds.	187	149	72	133	79	122	27	126	4
J. Cousins of gnus	98	159	190	57	83	145	67		
K. "In My Craft and Sullen Art" poet	184	135	59	100	1	39			
L. Sorghum product	169	71	89	175	21	99	116	144	
M. Legislative branch: 2 wds.	61	170	94	51	46	103	179	18	75 140
N. Serious thought	34	153	23	58	111	30	87	45	81 162
O. Hardly idolizes	177	15	120	53	138	174	101		
P. Weight	74	38	191	139	132	17	91	151	

	1	K	2	R	3	A	4	I	5	B		6	U	7	W	8	S		9	R	10	E	11	G					
12	V			13	X	14	W	15	O	16	T	17	P	18	M	19	Q	20	V	21	L		22	C	23	N			
24	R	25	H	26	U	27	I	28	W	29	C	30	N			31	A	32	R	33	B	34	N		35	F	36	G	
37	D	38	P	39	K			40	Q	41	D			42	T	43	A	44	U	45	N	46	M		47	V	48	R	
49	E	50	Q	51	M	52	S	53	O	54	C			55	B	56	X	57	J	58	N	59	K	60	G	61	M	62	A
		63	D	64	S	65	T	66	Q	67	J			68	F	69	G	70	R	71	L	72	I	73	C	74	P	75	M
		76	T	77	R	78	B			79	I	80	W	81	N	82	H	83	J	84	B	85	Q	86	F			87	N
88	G	89	L	90	B			91	P	92	V			93	W	94	M	95	D	96	S	97	T	98	J	99	L	100	K
101	O			102	H			103	M	104	T	105	R	106	C			107	E	108	H	109	X	110	G	111	N	112	S
		113	V	114	C	115	X	116	L			117	A	118	Q	119	E	120	O			121	A	122	I	123	T	124	Q
		125	W	126	I	127	V			128	E	129	G			130	D	131	U	132	P	133	I			134	S	135	K
136	Q	137	H			138	O	139	P	140	M			141	F	142	G	143	A			144	L	145	J	146	A		
147	C	148	Q	149	I	150	X	151	P			152	W	153	N	154	E	155	S	156	G	157	V	158	B			159	J
160	W			161	F	162	N	163	U			164	G	165	E	166	R			167	S	168	V	169	L	170	M	171	H
172	R	173	U	174	O			175	L	176	X	177	O			178	S	179	M	180	D			181	X	182	W	183	Q
		184	K			185	C	186	F			187	I	188	A	189	H	190	J	191	P	192	S	193	T	194	F		

Q. Glittery bauble

19 148 40 66 85 50 124 118 183 136

R. Done in shades of a single hue

9 32 77 70 24 48 105 172 2 166

S. Southeastern tree

178 8 52 167 64 134 155 96 192 112

T. City near Tampa

193 16 97 104 123 65 42 76

U. Made Feeble

131 26 173 6 44 163

V. George Clooney, to many: 2 wds. (slang)

157 12 20 47 168 92 113 127

W. Found

160 28 80 93 152 14 182 125 7

X. Kettledrums

150 56 115 13 181 176 109

DEATH IN THE KERAMIKOS CEMETERY

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG

It was not, after all, the worst of times. Or so we thought. The war with Sparta had begun. We had followed Pericles' plan and withdrew behind Athens' great city walls, letting the Spartans ravage the countryside and its farms. No matter, we thought. Our wells would provide enough water and our great fleet of triremes enough wheat from Phoenicia, corn from the Black Sea, and spices from Egypt to feed the whole population of Attica crowded within the city walls for a year or so. The Spartans would soon realize we refused to fight them on the land and would withdraw. In the meantime, our unbeatable navy would harass Sparta's allies until they all cried for a peace treaty. We would win this war.

But as time went on, the Spartans showed no signs of frustration or defeat. Our farmers grew restless at watching their farms burned, our citizens grew angry with the overcrowding, and we all began to doubt the wisdom of Pericles' plan.

Then, it struck. The plague. A few people ill at first, then more and more, until fear gripped us all, even myself, Kleides, a Sophist, triumphant rhetorician in our courts, friend of Pericles, priding myself on the power of reason. Even I writhed in the crushing arms of fear.

I feared for my wife Selkine, and for our young son Diocles, for my half brother Lamicus and his family. I feared this disease that preyed on the young and the old alike, on the pious and the impious, on the rich and the poor, and destroyed trust in reason, in morality, in gods, in the state. This disease unleashed the predatory instinct in all of us. We distrusted each other; we nursed old grievances; we looked at each other with fearful, angry eyes, blaming each other for death itself.

It was difficult under such circumstances to distinguish natural



Tim Foley

death from suicide or from murder. Death seemed the natural order of things.

I saw this predatory beast loose among us at the funeral of the grandson of my old friend Nicion, whose round, jolly face had morphed into a shadowed mask of tragedy worthy of Oedipus or Ajax or any one of Sophocles' most pitiful characters.

I stood in the Keramikos Cemetery, in a warren of graves, just outside the Dipylon Gate of the great wall and, in the pale sunlight of the cloudy day, watched Nicion place the wine amphora into the grave site where he had, only two weeks ago, buried his daughter, her husband, and his young granddaughter, reputed to have been even at a young age as beautiful as her mother had been. Inside the large wine amphora was the emaciated body of Nicion's young grandson, only six months old. Nicion was following the old tradition of burying babies in wine amphora, but he broke tradition by placing it in the offering ditch alongside the grave jugs and drinking cups in honor of the babe. Perhaps Nicion was holding onto hope that this young son would grow to manhood in the underworld. If so, Nicion was among the diminishing number of Athenians who believed in anything in the face of the disease devastating the city.

Nearby, other families buried loved ones, and the keening sound of mourning rent the very air. Suddenly, I was startled by the harsh sound of laughter in this place of grief. Several young men, apparently drunk, stumbled and lurched through the cemetery, striking phony poses of grief at the squares of cemetery markers. One even leaned on one of these stelae.

No one had the energy or even the spirit to object.

I thought of my own small son, only two, and wondered if he would live through this horror. I had forbade Selkine to leave our home, and she, once one of Athens' most beautiful and independent courtesans, had bowed her head, nodding in sad obedience.

A few feet away from me, Nicion's oldest son, Laios, motioned away the one professional mourner he had been able to hire, turned, and put a supporting hand on his father's shoulder.

I was about to go up to Nicion and Laios to offer my sympathies when I saw Laios stiffen. The skin of his handsome face seemed to harden over clinched teeth and widened eyes. His face reddened, taking on the hue of his reddish brown hair. "Sea trash," I heard him say, none too quietly.

Startled, I turned in the direction Laios was looking, expecting to see the drunken young men.

Thirty or so foot lengths away, near where the potters had their workshops on the banks of the Eridanos River, a lone man stood,

white funeral *lekythos* in hand. On the white urn was a scene of farewell, a tribute to a dead relative. I recognized Critus who had buried his own daughter and youngest son a week or so ago. His oldest son, Ariston, only returned to Athens a month ago from military duty, stood by him.

I stared at Ariston and Critus, then back at Laios and Nicion. The four men stood perfectly still, like figures on one of our beautiful Athenian black vases. No one moved, but the air seemed to flare with a current of—of what I could hardly define—of enmity, or a kind of vengeful animus between the men. I half expected a thunderbolt, thrown by Athena, to fall on the ground between the two pairs of men, and the voice of the goddess, as Homer described in the *Odyssey*, commanding the cessation of blood revenge.

Then Critus turned and strode up the Dromos road and back inside the city walls. His son Ariston turned toward the drunken men to his right, gave them a frown, turned back and frowned at Laios, then followed his father out of the cemetery.

Laios stared after Ariston for a moment, then drew his father away from the family grave site. I thought it best not to intrude on their grief. Instead, I followed them at a discreet distance up the Dromos and back into the city.

It was very difficult to walk the streets of Athens, our once vibrant, brilliant, ordered, and most envied city. I kept remembering scenes of earlier, happier years: the great festivals to Athena, the heated and energetic arguments about just what element constituted the Universe and everything in it, and the grace, beauty, and incomparable intellect and rhetoric of Pericles.

Now Athens was dark and death ridden. We walked about like rabbits and dogs caught in torrential rains. The very air we breathed, the earth on which we stood seemed to have become our enemies. We could not tell what would happen in the next year, or week, or even day. Would we feel tired and feverish, head burning, eyes inflamed, in the next few hours, then die within days? Would this plague disappear, sated with death, as suddenly as it appeared? Was the man passing me the bringer of death? Would someone prey on us, stealing our food, our water, as had already begun to happen? Would we become the predators ourselves, driven by desperation? As order broke down, would we begin to murder, taking meaningless revenge on each other?

These thoughts clamored in my brain as I walked home, half dreading to return to Selkine and Diocles, not knowing what I would find. I passed a house whose doors stood open, the inhabitants dead or dying. No one, including myself, entered to see. We all left that horror to the Thracians, once our hired police, now our

body collectors. As I walked up the Dromos toward the agora, I saw smoke billowing to the pale blue cloud-streaked sky, a large funeral pyre, I realized. I covered my mouth and nose against the acrid smell of unclaimed burning bodies.

As it was late in the day, there were few people about. A man emerged from a doorway, coughing. I hastened away, knowing the sign of the disease and not wanting to carry it to my home.

I was about to turn off the Dromos when I saw one man walking toward me from the direction of the fountain house. He strode easily, looking about. Then he stopped to give his urn of water to a man lying against a bootmaker's shop.

I knew that the man lying down must surely be ill with the disease, and I admired the compassion of the urn giver. I had admired him for many years. It was Socrates.

I waited for him to approach.

"Kleides," he said, as he neared me. "How good to see an old friend about and well."

I nodded. "I am glad to see you well too. And your family?"

"My wife is well, as fit for nagging me as ever."

I laughed. It felt good. "She has had ample reason for years, Socrates, as you refuse to take money for your teaching, and you give away what little you do have. As you just gave away your urn of water."

"The poor wretch needed it more than I do, and I am still healthy. I can get another urn and return to the fountain. But how are Selkine and Diocles?"

"They are well. None of my family has been struck yet, but . . ." I shrugged and looked about. "One can feel the doom hanging over the city."

"Indeed," Socrates said. "This disease strikes where it wishes. Our citizens are despairing. Many have ceased offering prayer or libation to the gods."

"Understandable," I said. "They see that the gods, if such there be, either care little or lack power against this dread disease. Or they blame us Sophists, calling this disease a punishment on Athens for our skepticism."

Socrates shook his shaggy head and wrinkled his large round nose. "Reason is the first fatality of such a catastrophe as this."

"I disagree, Socrates. I believe that compassion is the first fatality. Compassion flees in the face of fear."

"Ah, my dear Kleides, perhaps you are correct, but why should we show compassion to the ill if the gods do not?"

"Because we have reason, and reason tells us that we may ourselves be stricken and need compassion. It is only logical— Ah, I

see, Socrates. You are right again. Fear drives out reason and when reason flees, compassion follows. We become cruel."

Socrates smiled that impish smile of his. "I do not, as you know, claim to be right. Only highly intelligent because I realize how little I know." He sighed. "I'm afraid that it is our fellow Athenians, Kleides, who fail to question and learn."

I looked about us quickly, relieved that no one had approached near enough to hear our conversation. "You must take care, Socrates, in these days, of how you speak. Danger stalks our streets. The citizens of Athens look at you with suspicion. They believe that you corrupted our youth with your probing and questioning of set beliefs."

"Then perhaps, Kleides, you should not allow yourself to be seen talking with so evil a fellow as myself."

"I do not fear for myself, though I am a Sophist, and more a skeptic of the gods than you ever were. I know that you are no Sophist, but the citizens make no such distinction. And Athens can much more easily spare me than you and your insistence on keeping them thinking, struggle against it as they will."

"But I cannot spare you, Kleides. I find fewer and fewer people willing to even come out of their homes. They fear each other."

I nodded and told Socrates of the horrifying stare of animosity I'd seen pass between Laios and Ariston at the funeral of Laios' young nephew.

Socrates shook his head despairingly. "Laios and Nicion blame Ariston for the plague's taking their family. Ariston, on the way home from his sister's funeral, found Laios' niece in the street near her house, frightened and tired. She had escaped the servants' attention and wandered outside. Ariston carried her home. She became ill the next day, and a few days later her mother and father became ill, as did Laios' nephew. Laios and Nicion blame Ariston, though Ariston himself is clearly not ill. Once again, Kleides, reason has fled."

A movement took my attention away, and I looked beyond Socrates toward the fountain from which he had come. "And there, Socrates, is what has replaced reason."

Socrates turned. We both watched a group of five young people approaching. Three were the drunken men I'd seen in the cemetery. Two of the young men now had *hetaerae* with them, cheap prostitutes, likely from the port of Piraeus. The chiton of one of the *hetaerae* drooped perilously low over a shoulder and her hair hung loose about her face.

"I paid Dirce," one man shouted. "I gave her half the trinkets she has." He attempted to drag the woman toward himself.

"Too bad," the man who held her said, laughing. "Dirce wants me now. You lost your money, two drachmae, so you don't have enough to pay again. I guess you've lost twice." He freed an arm from round the hetaera and thrust his palm into the chest of the interfering man who stumbled back, fell, and crashed into the stall of a bread seller, scattering the bread into the dirt. The bread seller hurled curses at the young men. One of them raked a handful of dirt and threw it at the old man. The others laughed.

I watched, wondering how I could raise my own son in such an atmosphere. I felt that I should talk to Pericles, warn him of the chaos lapping at us all.

The young people neared. The man who had fallen, more drunk than his companions, made another move toward the hetaera. As he swung at the man who held her, I noticed something clutched in his hand, something white, that flew over the shoulder of the *hetaera* and into the drain that ran down the Dromos.

Laughing raucously, the group passed us. One of them greeted Socrates with an insult: "pig face." I stepped toward them, but Socrates restrained me, holding my arm.

"Hardly worth the effort, Kleides. Besides," he laughed, "my nose is rather like that of a pig. I'm quite proud of it. It is more efficient than small noses for its job of smelling, and therefore, one of the best of noses."

I laughed, said good-bye to Socrates, and hurried home.

I passed the herm at the entrance to the house. Before I'd married Selkine, when I lived, despite my inherited wealth, in what my half brother claimed was a hovel, I did not have a statue to the god Hermes for the protection of my living quarters. After Selkine and I married and moved into the large house I'd inherited from my parents, Selkine had insisted on a herm, and I'd indulged her. Now I was glad to see the herm and the little offering of wine to the god. I didn't believe that Hermes, who protected all entrances and borders, would prevent the disease from striking, but I found comfort in the rituals of everyday life.

I walked through the courtyard of the house and called out to one of the servant girls. "Where is your mistress?"

The servant girl, Athis, emerged from the kitchen. "She is upstairs with little Diocles. They are fine."

I breathed again. "Thank you, Athis."

I went up to the women's quarters where Selkine spent a good deal of time. Not that she or I ever enforced the Athenian custom, foolish in my eyes, of forbidding the women use of any part of the house except the women's quarters. In the few years we'd been married, Selkine had used what part of the house she

pleased, including the andron, the men's quarters normally used for entertainment.

She was strong willed and very beautiful. I was criticized for tolerating and downright encouraging Selkine's independence, just as Pericles was criticized for tolerating the independence of his mistress, the beautiful Aspasia, to whom Selkine bore an uncanny resemblance. I had been in love with Aspasia, perhaps still was, though I loved Selkine as well, a rather comic and disconcerting situation.

Upstairs, I entered Selkine's quarters. I caught my breath again, my pulse pounding, this time not in fear, but in desire. Selkine had insisted, despite the disease raging in Athens, on the importance—more now than ever, she said—of graciousness and beauty.

She had hung the walls with white materials, patterned with a blue key design. She wore a sky blue chiton, draped in soft folds over her shoulders. Using white and blue ties, she had pulled her hair up to expose her long, graceful neck. She wore on her upper arm a gold spiral armlet that I had given her on our wedding day.

It seemed almost against the plans of the universe for such beauty to be stricken by disease.

Diocles sat on the floor playing with his favorite toy, a wooden goose on which sat a disheveled rider who looked suspiciously like myself. Selkine had had the figure carved by a woodworker in the agora.

I felt an upwelling of gratitude to her for insisting on life.

I played with Diocles a bit, again defying Athenian tradition for fathers, and tried to get him to say 'atom,' myself having just reread Democritus' treatise on the whole universe being made of tiny particles called atoms.

Behind me, Selkine laughed. "Try teaching him 'father' or, if you insist on being philosophical, 'water.' Didn't Thales claim the universe was made entirely of water?"

"He did," I said, "but I prefer the theory of atoms." Diocles stared at me. "Maybe I should try 'air.'"

Selkine laughed and kissed me. "Glad to have you home," she whispered.

We played with Diocles a bit, then Selkine had the servant girl put Diocles to bed early, and we went to bed ourselves, though, of course, we did not sleep right away. With each other, we could forget, for a little while, the war, disease, despair, and anger that raged outside our walls.

The horror returned the next morning. We were sitting in the *andron* when Athis ushered in Socrates. Fortunately, Socrates, we knew, would not be shocked to see Selkine and Athis in the din-

ing room, reserved in most Athenian houses for men only, with the exception of the courtesans hired during symposiums. Of course, Selkine had once been a courtesan, albeit a very expensive one who selected her own partners, so there was little point in my banning her from the *andron*, even if I had wanted to. Nor, I must admit, would she have listened if I had tried. She would have laughed in her low, lilting way.

I knew when Socrates entered that he had bad news, though what further bad news could come to Athens was hard to imagine.

Selkine drew forward one of the backed chairs for Socrates to sit in and ordered Athis to bring some cheese, wine, and bread. Socrates did not object. He had little money himself for good wine and cheese.

"Ariston," Socrates said, spurning unnecessary preamble, "is dead."

"It could not be the plague," I said, thinking fast. "I saw him only yesterday."

Socrates shook his head sadly. "No. Not the plague. He apparently has been beaten to death. In the Keramikos Cemetery."

The look of hatred in Laios' eyes flashed before me. I wondered if my fears that we Athenians would prey murderously upon each other had materialized.

"Pericles asked me to come to you," Socrates said with a sigh. "He is tired, overwhelmed, and, for the first time since I have known him, fearful."

I nodded. "Pericles wishes me to investigate," I said.

"Indeed he does. He realizes how important it is to retain order as much as possible. We must uphold law and justice. You have solved many a case of homicide before in the interest of the state. You will do so now, I know."

"I will certainly try."

Socrates smiled. "I have full confidence in your reasoning ability," he said, "as well as your skills in understanding human behavior, to say nothing of your many connections with the underclasses of the city who seem to trust you enough to provide you with information aristocrats normally lack. I would attribute the connections to your somewhat disheveled hair and clothes, a look I believe you cultivate. My disheveled look is, of course, natural, though it does not seem to have won the approval of the underclasses. I suspect I am a bit too ugly and lazy, even for them. Even they do not realize the advantages of being ugly and lazy."

I laughed, enjoying again Socrates' banter and his usual deprecation of himself. "And what advantage is that?"

"Freedom," he answered. "Freedom to be a gadfly. I needn't

worry when people say I am a threat to the state. I am too ugly and earn too little money for the state to take such an idea seriously."

"I hope, Socrates, that you are correct in that assumption."

We enjoyed a bit more wine and cheese, and Socrates engaged Selkine in a discussion of beauty, Selkine holding her own in her assertion that beauty helped citizens maintain order. "It gives them," she said, "something to preserve, as with our Parthenon, so perfectly constructed. It is the embodiment of what we are fighting for when we defend Athens."

Socrates pointed out that the Spartans fight quite well and no Spartan has the slightest concept of beauty.

"Then," Selkine maintained, "they fight as wild boars fight, not as thinking humans should fight."

Socrates applauded Selkine, sparing her further questions on why anyone who thinks should fight at all. He left, and I turned my mind to Ariston's murder. As always, I knew that the place to begin was the murder scene. It often yielded, if not physical evidence, at least some sense of the movements of both victim and murderer.

That afternoon, I walked up the Dromos and out the Sacred Gate to the Street of Tombs. While other streets were often shrouded in silence and emptiness, the Street of Tombs had become one of the busiest streets in Athens. Here and there, families carried the bodies of loved ones to the cemetery. As often as not, the bodies were transported to their graves by hired Thracians, the families too frightened to bury their own dead. I passed the state burial ground, where some of the war dead had recently been buried, a simple marble stele pronouncing the names of the fallen. Here, Pericles had made his impassioned speech, exhorting Athenians to remember that they fought for the freedom Athens gave them: freedom to pursue learning and art and prosperity, freedom to determine who ran their government. Athenians had cheered him. Now they whispered against him. War and a disaster of nature had terrorized and angered us all.

I passed the tomb of the Athenian herald who had been murdered in Megara, where he had been sent to seek some way to avert war. His murder had spurred the war.

Now, I had another murder to solve. I approached the spot near the grave site of Ariston's family where, according to Socrates, Ariston's body had been found. Around me, the sound of weeping rent the air. It rose and fell as if carried by the foul wind over Athens.

I wound in and out among the tombs near that of Ariston's fam-

ily, slowly zeroing in on the tomb itself. I kept my eyes on the ground, kicking at stones now and again to make sure they were not covering some clue left behind by the murderer. I did not know, of course, what I was looking for: a bit of torn robe, perhaps; a headband or hat lost in the struggle I presumed had occurred.

I put on my own felt hat against the sun, burning today, grateful that Selkine had insisted on my taking it.

I breathed shallowly. The air was fetid and dusty, the clumps of grass here and there as lifeless and discouraged looking as the people who walked on them.

I circled closer and closer to the tomb of Ariston's family. I noticed shards scattered here and there from vases smashed against tombstones. I could make out the figure on one of the vases: Oedipus. He, too, had had a riddle to solve. I remembered that solving it had brought disaster down on Oedipus' head. That's theater, I assured myself, and continued to search.

I had circled round to the back of the free-standing tomb of Ariston's family when I noticed it. Black scribbling on the tomb. I stepped up closer. "Trash," the graffiti read. "Writhe in Hades, choking on sea salt."

Ariston, I remembered, had served his two years military service split between the navy and the infantry, as had his father. This was unusual. Usually, aristocratic young men served in the army, considering the navy "sea trash." I had served in both as well, glad of the experience of rowing and what I learned of life and men from the rowers.

I had a starting point. Someone had defaced the tomb of Ariston's family, likely last night, the night of the murder. If the defacing had been done sooner, the family would have noticed and had it removed.

I stepped closer and rubbed a finger on the black graffiti. It had been written with a piece of red-figured vase. Our prized Athenian red-figured vases had black backgrounds. I noticed, too, that a bit of the graffiti had been chipped away, as if someone had smashed something against the *stele* just where the graffiti had been scrawled.

"Trash, writhe in sea salt," I read aloud. Did an aristocrat scribble this? Laios or his father, both of whom considered Ariston a murderer? And who had smashed the vases?

I looked toward the potters' section of the Keramikos district where the river Eridanus ran, a good source of clay and water. Since I'd married Selkine, my home possessed some artistic pieces: shiny black glaze of iron oxide, finely spun on a spindle, with figures of Helen of Troy, Paris, Achilles, and even one of Ajax, about

to commit suicide in despair over his ruined reputation as the best warrior at Troy.

Potters, of course, I thought, had easy access to black glaze. Might some potter have had some grudge against Ariston? I dismissed the idea. It wasn't just potters who had access to pottery shards with black glaze. It was just about everyone in Athens.

I pushed my felt hat back on my now thinning hair and began one last circle round the tomb site. I didn't expect to find anything, but a second look never hurt, and besides, I found myself surprisingly very pleased to have a homicide to solve. Somehow the murder seemed more quotidian, more routine, and far less threatening than the unnatural monster that had arisen from only Hades knew where to prey on Athens. Murder was the result of understandable human emotion: fear, greed, jealousy, anger.

I circled wider and wider from the tomb, picked up a drachma coin, a small delicate gold ring, and the bottom half of a votive statue. I stored them in the sack I carried, along with a few shards from the smashed vases. I had no way of knowing which item, if any, had something to do with Ariston's murder.

I removed my felt hat and swiped my forehead. The sun blazed down now on the Keramikos, reflecting almost blindingly off the limestone and marble tombs. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.

For a moment, I succumbed to terror. Cerberus, I thought, the hound of Hell, loose in Athens. I shook myself. I had to get out of this cemetery before I metamorphosed from a skeptical, reasoning Sophist to a trembling, superstitious peasant from the backwaters of Thrace.

I decided I was being a snob and that I'd best do what any common-sense peasant would do under the circumstances: go to a nearby tavern and get some cheap wine, the gift of the gods.

I headed to the tavern of Callita, my tough, loyal friend. She'd helped me solve crimes before and had even come to my aid in brawls in which, had it not been for Callita, I would have had my aquiline nose, my one good feature, knocked askew.

At the edge of the Keramikos, I approached Callita's mud-brick tavern. It was small and bore the stains and gouges of three decades of wear and tear. The roof had missing tiles where the rain in the winter dripped inside, staining the walls a dirty gray. The tavern's dirt floor, I knew, contained spit, rotted olives, blood, and probably not just a few bodies of every species of insect the earth produced. Anaximander, I thought, could happily have indulged himself in fossil studies here for years to come, speculating on how men evolved from fishes.

I loved the place.

I entered and blinked, trying to get my eyes to adjust to the dim room after the brilliant sun outside. Two men sat drinking, sullenly isolated in corners, nursing their wine in Callita's plain terra-cotta cups. One man I knew: Hesios, an aristocrat who never failed to vote to ostracize Pericles and who had lost a case against a neighbor. I had helped the neighbor prove that Hesios' claim to some land was false. I smiled brightly at him. He frowned and spat on the floor, adding to its unspeakable composition.

"Kleides," Callita exclaimed, "my friend. At last, someone to talk to about anything but this rottenness in the city. Come." She gestured to a stool near the bar. She'd already poured out a cup of wine, good wine, and set beside it a cup of water for mixing. I glanced at another man with thickly muscled arms and legs, a hardworking farmer, I guessed, who drank without mixing water into his wine, normally a sign of a Spartan. But this man was an Athenian. I couldn't blame him for drinking his wine undiluted these days.

"So," Callita said, leaning her brawny arms on the bar, her chiton dipping a bit low over ponderous breasts. "What do you Sophists have to say about this sickness? I know you won't go along with the gloom and doom claim that Zeus is punishing us for neglecting some altar or other of his, planning to wipe us all out for impiety."

I stole a glance at Hesios. He was frowning again, as I had expected. He adhered to the myths of the gods quite conservatively.

"I thought you said you didn't want to talk about the disease," I said to Callita.

"Well, don't hold me to that. I figure you Sophists have some amusing theory on it all. So what is it? Those funny little atoms you believe in, all clashing and banging around and making everybody sick?" Callita threw her head back in raucous laughter, then leaned forward. "Well," she said, addressing the farmer on the right, "as good a theory as any, right?"

He remained silent.

"I said as good a theory as any," Callita repeated louder. "Right?"

The farmer nodded. "Right."

Most of Callita's customers had learned to agree with her. Small price to pay for good wine at good prices or bad wine at even better prices.

"I'm afraid I haven't got a good theory, Callita," I said. "But I've heard an interesting one. A young man, Hippocrates, has been

claiming that we'd have less disease if we ate in moderation, walked a lot, and most of all, kept clean. Keep the drainage system clean. Keep the rats away from the city. Keep our houses clean. He's making a name for himself over at Epidaurus. It's becoming a key site for healing. Rumor has it Hippocrates uses medicines to heal and even to allow him to put people asleep so that he can repair broken limbs and such. I am quite fascinated and want to go to Epidaurus to see for myself."

"Apollo heals, not some brash skeptic claiming powers he doesn't have."

Callita and I looked at Hesios.

Callita jerked her head in Hesios' direction. "He might have a point. If this Hippocrates is right about keeping clean, anybody who walks into this place ought to drop dead before they reach the bar." She laughed uproariously again.

"Callita," I said, "no disease would dare come in here. You'd send it sprawling out into the dirt and limping off to Corinth or Sparta."

"You're right about that," she replied. "Still, maybe I ought to wash my hair more often and put it up, nice and pretty like." She patted her matted gray-black hair, then threw her big head back in laughter. "Now that you've taken Selkine out of action, Athens needs a new beauty for symposia." She became serious. "Selkine and your boy doing fine?"

"Yes, they are." I saw my opening. "But I received news of the death of a young man yesterday. Ariston. Did you know him, Callita?"

"Don't know the name. He wasn't one of those young wastrels that come in here. The sickness get him?"

"No. He was murdered."

Hesios' head jerked up. Callita whistled.

"When did this happen?" she asked.

"Last night. Here in the Keramikos Cemetery district."

Callita's big, round brown eyes grew rounder. "You said last night?"

I nodded.

Callita leaned toward me. "Now that's a very funny thing. A sign, Kleides, and no denying it. I stayed up last night, burning the olive oil late. Had some cleaning up to do." She looked round. "Okay, not cleaning maybe, but tamping down the floor, getting it smooth. I was just about done when I heard it. Just about when the moon was full up." She leaned closer, nodding her head like some big bushy tree acknowledging the wind. "A cock crowed. No mistake."

I didn't say anything for a minute. "A cock crowed?"

Callita nodded. "A sign," she said. "A death sign."

"Perhaps it was nearer dawn than you thought. It wouldn't be unusual to hear . . ."

"I said it was just as the moon was full up." The muscles in Callita's upper arms flexed.

"Oh yes. You did. Of course," I agreed, smiling pleasantly.

"Now you tell me, Kleides, what's a cock doing prancing around the cemetery and crowing in the night?"

I wiped the smile from my face. If Callita said she heard a crow, she likely did. Ordinarily, she was not given to flights of fancy. "Can you tell me about how long after dark you heard this?" I asked.

She skewed her lips to the side in thought. "I'd say about two hours."

"You're sure?"

Callita's muscles flexed again.

"Well, of course you are. Just as you said," I added hastily.

"So this Ariston was murdered in the night?" Callita asked.

"What was he doing in the Keramikos in the night?"

A loud harrumph came from Hesios' corner.

Callita and I stared at him.

"Doesn't surprise me," Hesios sneered. "It's a damn shame what's happened to Athens." He pointed a finger at me. "It's all the fault of Socrates and you rotten sophists, tearing down values, teaching the younger generation to question everything, turning them into drunken trash who don't respect anything, who run around all night smashing everything in sight, wasting their fathers' drachmae on cheap girls and wine." He rose and took a few steps forward. "You damn sophists . . ."

He stopped in his tracks.

Callita had stepped out from behind the bar and was moving ominously toward him. "Who's the drunken lout here?" she shouted. "Nobody's turned our young people into anything. Kleides here is my customer and my friend, and if you can't drink without insulting my customers, I'll thank you to leave before I toss you out."

Hesios stood still. He looked stunned.

The farmer banged his cup down on the table and spit. "She's right about one thing. It isn't Socrates or this fellow who caused all this trouble. It's the damn war. We Athenians used to fight in the old days. We fought the Persians at Marathon and we won. Now it's all ships and oars and navy. And if you ask me, this sickness came from the sea, ships coming from Zeus knows what strange countries, bringing Zeus knows what kind of strange people and animals and trash. Now everybody's fighting each other.

Doesn't surprise me somebody got murdered in the Keramikos."

Callita, who had served many a seaman in her tavern, turned on the farmer. "If it weren't for our sailors, we'd all be living under the Persian yoke. Have you forgotten about Salamis? It was the navy that finally drove the damn Persians out. So if you want to know what trash is, just take a good look at—"

I interrupted just as she gestured toward Hesios. "Look," I said, "this is Callita's place, and she doesn't need us to make her day more nerve wracking than it already is. We're all on edge here."

Hesios got up, threw a coin on the table, and left. The farmer hunched over his cup of wine. I thanked Callita for her spirited defense of Socrates and myself.

She laughed, returning quickly to her good-natured self and offered the farmer and myself a free cup of wine.

I turned to the farmer. "Any particular reason you aren't surprised someone was killed in the Keramikos?" I asked.

"Drunken men there, chasing each other around, smashing vases, defaming graves. I saw them yesterday."

"How many men?"

"I saw two."

"Can you describe them?"

The description he gave could have matched any number of young men.

"Did you see the men defacing gravestones?"

"Yes."

"How long were the men in the cemetery?"

"How should I know? I was just cutting through the cemetery, taking the last of my barley and eggs up to my stall in the agora for tomorrow. Later, when I walked back to the hut where my potter friend lives, the men were still there. One of them anyway. He was too drunk to stand. Crawled around on the ground."

"What time was that?"

The farmer shrugged. "I don't know. A few hours after dark. I was late because I had to repair my stall. Damn drunken trash. Smash everything in sight. The moon was up, like this one said." He gestured to Callita. "But I didn't hear no cock crow."

Callita took a deep breath and put her brawny arms on her hips.

The farmer gulped his wine and left.

I drank mine slowly, trying to line up all the images in my mind: cocks crowing, graffiti, broken statues; coins, rings, shards, sea trash. Which of them were connected to the murder and which were not?

I finished my wine, thanked Callita again, and left. I walked up to the Sacred Gate, reentered the walls of the city, and headed

into the agora. The marketplace lacked the large numbers of people who used to crowd the stands of potters, fish sellers, and olive oil sellers, and who used to bargain for flute players, prostitutes, and professional mourners in the days before the disease. But here and there, groups of people still bought food, still sold wares, though few lingered to converse. They conducted their business and left.

Just past the Stoa of Zeus, I spotted the farmer who had been at Callita's. He was carrying a bag that jerked and jumped at his side. I hadn't seen the bag in the tavern. I assumed that he had either just picked it up from a seller or that he had left it outside the tavern when he came in for a drink. Curious, I followed him.

He moved toward the South Stoa into the area where some stalls had been set up. He stopped in front of one of the stalls and talked to several men who had been apparently buying goods.

I watched.

One man came out of the stall, carrying a cock. The farmer opened his sack and pulled out another cock, holding the creature by its feet. The farmer drew a circle in the dirt, extracted a drachma from his leather shoes, placed the bet, matched by the stall owner, on the edge of the circle. The two men set the cocks at each other. I knew the sport and didn't much care for it. The cocks would fight to the death, the owner of the winning cock taking the bet money.

Trash and cocks. It wasn't quite evidence enough to convince me that the farmer was involved in the murder. The term "sea trash" was used commonly enough, as it had been by Laios, and it was by no means certain that the cock that had crowed, if indeed one had, in the Keramikos in the night, had been the farmer's cock. Besides, what motive had the farmer to kill Ariston? But I did wonder where the poor farmer had gotten a drachma.

I filed the evidence and doubts away in my head and walked toward the mint. Nicion lived at this end of the Panathenaic Way.

My inquiries found him home, and I was ushered into the andron, a handsome one with a black and white mosaic floor. A key design ran round the edges and down the middle of the mosaic.

With Nicion, I was straightforward. I told him of Ariston's murder. His face froze; the smudges under his eyes darkened. He expressed no sorrow. I hadn't expected it. Athenians seldom wasted compassion on their enemies.

"Nicion," I said. "I've spoken to a man who saw some young men at the Keramikos last night. I have to ask you. Was Laios home last night?"

"He was," Nicion said, his eyes unblinking.

"The whole night?"

"He was."

I pulled out the items from my sack and spread them out on the small three-legged table that stood in front of Nicion. "Do you recognize any of these?" I pushed around the half statue, the drachma, the gold ring, and the shards.

Nicion stared at the items. "No." He turned his head away from me and the items.

I couldn't tell if he were lying or not. He looked very old, his skin, hanging down over his once-full face, like a shroud over a skull. I could not bear to badger him.

"Where is Laios?" I asked.

"Out. To get us food."

I nodded, gathered the items back into the sack, and rose. "Nicion," I said, "are you ill? Can I help you to your bed?"

He shook his head, rose, and walked out of the room.

Suddenly, my own bones felt heavy with the burden of finding the murderer. I wanted only to go home to Selkine. I dragged myself out of Nicion's home.

As I neared Pericles' home, a servant motioned to me. I followed him inside. Aspasia was waiting in the *andron*. She looked, in her white chiton, as lovely as always, as calm, as intelligent, just as she had when, in my younger days, I was in love with her. I felt that same thrill when I saw her. Perhaps I was still in love with her in an idealized way, while my love for Selkine was real and actualized.

"Pericles is very weary," Aspasia said, "but he wanted you to know how grateful he is for your help in this murder of Ariston. He is most concerned about order in the city. But he will understand if you want only to be with Selkine and your young son."

I could almost have believed, were I not a Sophist, that some god or other had transported my recent thoughts to Pericles' home. Indeed, I yearned to say that I could not accept this burden, that one more death hardly mattered in the realm of Hades, but I knew that it did matter—to Pericles, to Athens, to justice, and therefore, to myself. I assured Aspasia that I would continue my investigation.

"I would take you in to Pericles," she said, "but he has just fallen asleep and I am reluctant to wake him."

"Let him sleep," I said. "Athens sorely needs him and his calm, steady hand."

"If only the Athenians would realize that as you do, Kleides. But I must go to watch over him now."

Alarms sounded in my brain. "He is not . . . he does not have the illness?"

"I do not know. I pray that it is only weariness. He has been awake day and night, working and planning and thinking. Today he had trouble even lifting his head."

I saw then the dark shadows under Aspasia's eyes, reminiscent of those under Nicion's. I wondered if soon all eyes in Athens would be shadowed by these marks of sorrow. I bade her good-bye, asking her to give my expressions of love and loyalty to Pericles.

I left, watched a funeral procession pass by, took a deep breath, and began walking down toward our mint and the fountain house. Water these days seemed far more precious than our Athenian drachmae. I decided to head to one of the gymnasiums in search of Laios or of the young men I had seen yesterday in the Agora. If neither were there, I could do some discus throwing or running. It would help clear my head.

I passed the prison and shuddered a little. I'd heard talk from frightened and angry people, such as Hesios at Callita's, about the prison being where Socrates should be kept.

I saw the young men for whom I was searching before I got to the gymnasium. They were milling about near one of the small shrines to Hermes, mocking the god. One of the men was sitting on the ground.

"You've been dragging about, moaning for Dirce since she returned to the port yesterday," one of the men, a large, burly fellow, said to the seated one. "So here's the messenger god. Why don't you ask Hermes to send a quick message to Dirce. Something like, 'come quick or it'll burst.' Of course, you'll need to steal a few more of your father's drachmae." He made an obscene gesture.

"Look here," another of the men said contemptuously, taking a narrow-mouthed vase, a *lekythos* undoubtedly with a voice offering of oil, from the base of the altar. "A gift from Hermes," he said, pointing the narrow mouth of the vase toward Dirce's apparent lover. "Not Dirce, but then, by Hades, might be even better. Less used, anyway."

The offended lover jumped up and knocked the vase from his tormentor's hand. It flew against the altar and broke.

From the left of the altar, a man in a short-belted tunic smudged with red, likely the glaze used for detailed figures on our famous Athenian vases, flew at the lover. "Fish-brained lout," he shouted. "That vase was a masterpiece." He flung the young man to the ground. The two other young men leapt toward the potter. One of them, the burly one, butted his head full into the potter's stomach. The potter flew back against the altar. I moved forward just as the potter slid to the ground.

Dirce's lover, struggling up from the ground, saw me and said

something to his friends. He threw back his head, crowing like a vain rooster, then lunged toward me. I continued forward but prepared my stomach for a sickening lurch. It never came.

From the right, another man appeared. I recognized the thick-muscled torso, like a well-grown olive tree trunk, of the farmer from Callita's tavern.

Apparently thinking better of continuing the fight now that the odds were evened out, the young men fled.

The farmer helped the potter to his feet.

"You are not badly hurt, are you?" I asked, approaching.

The potter shook himself, rubbed his belly, then bent down and picked up a piece of the *lekythos*. He held it gingerly as if it were a fine marble sculpture. "A masterpiece," he said. "I know the artist. He worked long and carefully on this *lekythos*. A beautiful figure of Penelope, waiting for Odysseus." He let the piece fall from his hand. "These sons of satyrs. These cursed pieces of fish gut. I've chased them from the Keramikos several times. They'd break every vase, every statue. They'd tear down our Parthenon itself in their drunken rages."

"Come on, my friend," the farmer said. "Everything in Athens is polluted these days." He looked at me defiantly. "If we see these fine young aristocrats again, we'll skewer them like the pig meat they are and make barley mash of anyone who objects."

I made no objection.

The two men left, making their way up the Dromos toward the Keramikos district.

I followed at a discreet distance, thinking hard about the young men. As I neared the fountain up toward the Sacred Gate where I had spoken with Socrates yesterday, I remembered. I turned back, moved to the side of the Dromos, and shuffled my way through the dust, peering into the drain that ran alongside the road. It took only a few minutes to spot what I was looking for. I knelt down for a better look, then got up and moved away from the drain into the agora, where the sellers were packing up their stalls for the day, and rooted around until, near a carpenter's stall, I found a piece of wood. It was small, but it would do. I picked it up, returned to the drain, knelt again, and fished out a chunk of marble: white and about the size of the object one of the three young men had thrown at another. It was part of a statue. Not wanting to handle it too much until I'd had a chance to wash it, I pushed it to the side of the drain, returned to the agora, bought a cheap clay jar, walked back to the drain, and pushed the statue piece inside the jar. At home, I could see if it matched the piece I'd found where Ariston had been murdered.

I started back up the Dromos, stepping aside again, this time to avoid a cart two burly Thracians were dragging toward the Keramikos. I knew what was in the cart. A load of bodies headed for a pyre or one of the mass graves outside the city wall. Like those around me, I covered my nose to block out the stench.

A servant woman carrying a basket brushed by me. She had pulled a cloak round her nose and mouth. I could see only her eyes, large, black, full of fear and loathing.

A man, not far behind her, coughed. The servant woman jerked, then lifted her chiton a little and ran, her basket banging against her hip.

I felt that I needed again some sense of the normal, the everyday. I headed for Tysander's barbershop. Tysander's ministrations would soothe me. Besides, Tysander knew a good deal about what went on in Athens. He might know the answer to the question that was bothering me: Callita's question. What was Ariston doing in the Keramikos in the middle of the night?

Tysander's place was empty of customers when I arrived. Tysander himself was sitting at a table, sharpening knives and cleaning basins.

"Kleides," he greeted me. "At last, someone not afraid of getting his beard trimmed." He began to bustle about, getting oil and heating water on the charcoal brazier.

I sat down in a chair and took some deep breaths. Tysander began trimming my beard, chattering about the war and the possibility that the Spartans would retreat from the countryside for the coming winter months. "And maybe then," he said, "Apollo will lift this unholy illness from us." He held up a hand. "But I don't want to talk about it."

"Good," I said.

"So many people dying," he went on. "The Thracians can't keep up with the bodies. Just the other day, I—"

I held up my hand. "Did you know Ariston?" I asked.

Tysander shook his head gravely. "I did. I know his father too. I heard about Ariston dying. This awful disease took him very fast."

I filled Tysander in on how Ariston had died.

He sat down and put his head in his hands. "This is bad, Kleides. We have to kill each other now? We can't wait for this monster curse to do its work? Are you sure about his being beaten to death?"

"I am. Do you know if Ariston had enemies, Tysander? I mean besides Laios and Nicion. Their animosity seems to be pretty well known."

Tysander thought. "Well, the story I know is old, but maybe . . ." He shrugged.

"Tell me."

"Ariston had some trouble about a year ago with some of the young men serving with him as border guards at a military outpost up in Boetia. Some of the men were drunk and disorderly while on duty. As I heard it, Ariston reported them to their superior. One of the men was kicked out in disgrace, but nothing much happened to the other two. Their families were wealthy enough, I take it. Anyway, rumor had it that the three of them beat up Ariston for reporting them."

"Do you know the three involved? Are they back in Athens?"

"Indeed, they are." Tysander picked up the flask of oil and began cleaning my face and neck. "You could grow olive trees in your hair and beard. You been wrestling in the dirt with some creature?"

"Something like that. Tysander, have you any idea why Ariston would go down to the Keramikos at night?"

"I do. He told me himself. He said that with all the disorder in the city, he feared that someone might disfigure his family's grave site. He was going to go to the cemetery to keep a vigil during the night, as soon as his old father was safely asleep. Old Critus doesn't sleep well these days. Which of us does?"

"Did Ariston think his old border guard enemies would do that?"

"He didn't name anybody, but I took it it was those three he feared." Tysander supplied three names.

I let Tysander finish cleaning my beard and face, traded insults about the Spartans, thanked him, then started home. I thought about Nicion and Laios, about the potter and the farmer, about the three louts Tysander had named. I thought about the graffiti, the drachma, the smashed vases and statues I had found at the murder site, and I remembered one of the drunken men saying the other had lost his money. I thought about the small gold ring. Perhaps the prostitute Dirce had lost the ring there, if she had been with the men. I still didn't know how the statue figured in. But at least I knew now why Ariston had gone to the Keramikos at night. Had the drunken men been there, the ones the farmer had seen defacing the grave? Had Ariston challenged them, only to have them beat him to death? I thought of Ajax, the hero of myth about whom Sophocles had written a play. Ajax had tried to kill the warrior he thought had disgraced him.

At home, I ate a good supper of eels, goose eggs, and barley cakes sweetened with honey and cloves from Egypt. Selkine had greatly improved my meals, rejecting the salt fish and blood puddings I'd eaten as a single man, too busy reading scrolls to fuss about meals.

After the nurse had taken Diocles to bed, Selkine and I sat

down to talk. I told her what I'd discovered about Ariston's murder.

"Let me see the items," Selkine said.

I dumped them from the sack and the piece of a broken statue from the clay jar, wiping it thoroughly.

Selkine reached for the gold ring. "Where did you find this, exactly?" she asked.

I explained. "It could belong to the prostitute I saw with the young drunken men I told you about. They had reason to dislike, if not hate, Ariston. And they were certainly in the Keramikos the night Ariston was killed. If the ring does belong to the prostitute Dirce, perhaps given to her by one of the men, it places the group near where Ariston was killed, just as the farmer placed them."

Selkine lay the ring on her palm, then put it halfway down on her little finger. "Very pretty," she said, "but small. Quite small." She looked up at me. "Did you say 'Dirce'?"

"That's the name one of the men called her."

Selkine frowned. "What did she look like?"

"Round face. Nose a bit crooked. Big eyes. Her best feature I'd say. Rather plump."

Selkine nodded. "I didn't know the girl, but I'd seen her once or twice. She was slender and not unpretty when she first entered the profession. But she fell lower and lower. Drank and ate too much." She removed the ring from her finger and held it up toward the light from the torches. "I doubt that this is her ring. Looks more like a child's ring. Besides, Dirce would prefer money as payment." She slipped the ring back onto her little finger. It gleamed yellow in the torchlight.

I stared at Selkine. It was not the first time she had set me on the right track to finding a murderer. She'd helped me at Delphi once when I had been too jealous of her wealthy lover to use my addled brains.

I picked up the piece of broken statue I'd found near the murder site and examined it closely. It was the base of a statue on which was carved a snake. "Asclepius," I said, "the god of sickness and health." I reached for the piece I'd found in the drain. The two pieces of broken statues did not match. "Asclepius," I mumbled. "I begin to see now. Look, the broken upper part of the Asclepius statue is smudged with a touch of black."

Selkine picked up the drachma. "Does this money mean anything?"

I told her about the drunken men talking of lost money. "Possibly the lovers," I said. "But anyone could have lost a drachma in the

cemetery," I added, thinking of the farmer. It's the ring and the statue that mean something."

From out in the dark street, a cock crowed.

Selkine and I looked at each other.

I stood up. "I think I understand now who killed Ariston and why," I said. "But I could be wrong. I must go to the Keramikos."

Selkine nodded. "I know. But take care. I will alert some Thracian guards."

I gathered up the articles we'd been examining, tucked them into a sack, tied them to my cape, and kissed Selkine, grateful for her help. I had learned a good long time ago that burly friends and Thracian guards are good folks for me when I face possible physical conflict.

Out in the street, I thanked fate, if not the gods, for the full moon that allowed me to see the three figures headed for the Keramikos. I decided to follow the three men up the Dromos toward the cemetery, just in case I was wrong.

The air, sullen, hot, and heavy, hung oppressively over the stricken city. Few sounds reached my ears. Here and there the buzz of insects, and now and again the wail of someone ill or finding a loved one felled by the disease.

Over the thick city walls in a far part of the cemetery, smoke rose up into the night sky, gleaming like some filmy shroud in the fitful flames of fire. I knew that the fire was tended by Thracians, hired to burn the bodies of those whose friends and families were too fearful to bury their dead or were themselves already dead.

By the Bouleuterion, torches burned. Seventeen citizens of the five hundred selected by lot to serve for a year were, as always, on duty in the building, ready to handle any urgent business for the city. I took heart. Our democracy still functioned, even in the midst of the terror.

I slunk down the Dromos, keeping to the side of the road. I needn't have worried. None of the three men ever turned and looked behind. If they were up to no good, they seemed not to fear anyone's following them and that for good reason. Few citizens ventured out in the night, as if death stalked more boldly in the dark than in the light of the sun.

The three young men, occasionally pushing each other or pausing to drink from a leather sack, headed to the great wooden doors of the Dipylon Gate. The guards spoke to the three, then allowed them out. I hurried, anxious to see what route they took into the Keramikos.

As I approached the gate, I let the guards know that I was on a

mission for Pericles. Recognizing me, they let me through immediately.

I kept pace behind the three, waiting for them to turn through one of the wall openings into the cemetery itself.

Here and there, limestone blocks, built into the mud, brick, and stone of the walls, glittered in the moonlight.

As the men approached the heart of the cemetery, one of them threw back his head and crowed. The sound carried back over the city behind me and seemed to pierce the heavy air itself. It was this young cock, no doubt, that Callita had heard in her tavern, a crowing far louder than any the farmer's genuine rooster could have produced.

Silence ruled again for a moment, then the laughter of the three men echoed between the great walls. They continued on.

I realized then that they were headed not into the cemetery but down the length of the great walls to the port of Piraeus, no doubt for a night of revelry with Dirce or some other hetaera.

If what Callita had heard two nights ago had been these young men, they had perhaps been headed for Piraeus then, too, and not for the cemetery to defile the grave site of Ariston's family. But why hadn't the farmer heard the crowing? Perhaps he had advanced too far into the cemetery.

I slowed down and fingered the objects in the sack that hung at my side. Then I headed toward Callita's tavern before curving back into the city. I needed some wine. The confrontation I was headed for would not be easy.

I approached the tavern, glad to step into the welcoming light of the torches Callita had burning at the entrance. I opened the door, then reached to my side to make sure the sack didn't bang against the door. I wanted the evidence inside kept intact.

From the corner of my eye I caught a figure moving into the Keramikos, a dark shape against the outside of one of the limestone walls leading down to Piraeus. I stared. Unlike the three young men, this man was headed directly into the cemetery.

I knew who it was.

The burly broad shoulders of the farmer and his thick legs showing beneath his short tunic were unmistakable.

From inside the tavern, Callita called to me. "Kleides," she called. "Welcome. Still healthy despite stalking about the city at all hours." She laughed to a customer leaning against the bar. "Kleides thinks that Hippocrates fellow might be right that staying clean keeps you healthy. Personally, I think it's wine that does it, provided you drink enough of it." She motioned to me to come on inside.

I shook my head. "I'll return. I hope," I said. "If some Thracians

come looking for me, tell them I've gone down into the cemetery. I want to ask someone a final question."

I closed the door, moved out of the torchlight, and stared into the cemetery. With a cloud over the moon now, the cemetery was sunk in darkness, except where light from the burning pyre, though some distance away, flung a strange orange glow here and there over the marble stelae of the grave sites and the tops of the clumps of olive trees, like the glaze of orange on the dark background of an Athenian urn. Ironical, I thought, how this disease seemed to mock one of the glories of our Athenian art.

I shook the morbid thought away and moved into the cemetery, sidling from stele to stele, watching for the burly figure, unsure now of what his presence and the items in my sack meant.

I paused to stare into the darkness. It was not the figure of the farmer my eyes picked out of the darkness now, but the flicker of a torch, low to the ground. Its dancing flame appeared, disappeared, appeared again. I thought of what the farmer had told me. When he had cut back through the cemetery late at night, he had seen one man only, crawling.

The light danced around the site of the graves of Ariston's family.

I moved quickly forward, avoiding the dark and dirty water of the Eridanos River that flowed through the cemetery, round the tumulus that contained the grave of Anthemokritos, the Athenian herald murdered in Megara on his futile mission to persuade our enemies to avoid war.

I crept up near the tomb site of Ariston's family.

The torch still flickered low to the ground. Then suddenly, it rose, held high by the hand of Laios.

I watched. Laios moved slowly round the tomb, bending now and then to forage in the weeds and brush.

I watched, quite sure now, for what he searched.

I waited for a moment, reached into the sack, then called out. "Laios."

The torch jerked, then swung round toward me. Laios stood, frozen.

I moved toward him. I stopped ten foot lengths away and lifted my hand.

The torch caught the gleam of gold.

"Is this what you are searching for?" I asked.

Laios stayed frozen.

"You dropped it, didn't you, when you fought with and killed Ariston. The gold ring of your little niece."

In the light of his torch, I saw Laios swallow hard.

"And the statue of Asclepius, the god of healing. You smashed it

didn't you, against the stele of Ariston's family, chipping the limestone and smudging the statue with a bit of the black paint from the graffiti on the wall, the graffiti scrawled there earlier."

"He murdered my family," Laois said finally. "He carried the disease. And the gods refused to stop him."

"No," I said. "The disease is everywhere. It is not the gods or humans who are responsible. The disease is in nature. It is part of life and death. But you are responsible for the murder of Ariston."

"He murdered my niece," Laios shouted. He dropped his torch and lunged at the ring I still held up in my hand.

His sudden movement took me off guard and I fell backward as he smashed into me. The gold ring flew back out of my hand.

Laios scrambled up, leapt over me, then dropped to his knees, clawing at the grass to find the ring.

I rolled over, got to my knees, and watched him.

He was like a madman, crazed by grief and fear, a victim of the disease without being ill.

Then he jumped up and swung toward me, wielding a heavy rock in his right hand, just as he must have used it to beat Ariston. He had his left fist closed tight. He had found the ring. It was all that remained of his beautiful little niece.

Ariston, no doubt, staying with his old father until late, had arrived at the cemetery too late to prevent the defacing, but just in time to meet the grieving Laios who had madly killed him.

"Kleides," someone shouted.

Laois started, swung round, saw the people approaching, then ran, leaping over gravestones. He disappeared into the dark cemetery.

"You fish brain," the farmer shouted, running toward me, followed closely by Callita, who had called out my name. "You'll burn like a dried stalk of wheat."

Only then did I smell the burning grass behind me, lit afire by Laios' torch.

The farmer stomped on the burning grass.

Callita yanked me out of the way and batted at the edge of my chiton. She managed to slap the fire out without banging me around too much. "Are you hurt, Kleides?"

"I wasn't," I said.

"You sophists," Callita said. "You can persuade a stone to vote for a policy you want, but you don't know enough to move away from a fire. Thank Zeus you are all right."

"I am very glad you came, Callita. I owe my life to you once more." I turned to the farmer. "And to you," I said. "I don't know why you came to the Keramikos tonight," I said, "but I am glad you did."

"I didn't come to kill anyone, though I suspect you might have thought so at some point. I came because I heard the young man's shouting." He glanced at Callita, a little cautiously. "Not a real rooster at all. I know the difference. As I told you, they were in the Keramikos, drunk the other night, defacing stelae, as they had been for several nights. I found a drachma they lost. One of the men complained he'd lost two, but I found only one. When I heard the imitation of a cock again a little earlier, I came to the Keramikos, hoping the men would lose a bit more money. These days are hard for us farmers. The Spartans have burned our fields."

I reached into my sack and pulled out the drachma. I handed it to the farmer.

"Let's go to my place," Callita said. "We could all use a drink. Unless, Kleides, you feel you have to pursue Laois."

I thought of Nicion's tragic face when I'd questioned him about Laios' whereabouts on the night Ariston was murdered and of how he'd turned his head away from the items I put on the table, among them his granddaughter's little ring. I should have known that his stoic answers betrayed his knowledge of Laios' guilt. Were Laios innocent, Nicion should have stormed at me in angry protest. Instead, he had simply lied, given in to the completion of his family's tragedy. I thought of the three young men and the breakdown of order. I thought of Socrates and the growing hostility against him. Our democracy faced larger problems than Laios. I thought of my son. I would be needed here in Athens. "No, Callita," I said. "I will not pursue him. We have exposed the murder and the murderer. That our citizens will know. He has nowhere to go. He will either return voluntarily to Athens or escape to the Spartans where his life will be as tortured as is his mind."

"This rotten disease and this rotten war," Callita said. "None of us are safe. We have come to distrust and blame and hate one another instead of our enemies."

I looked up toward my beloved Athens. The great Parthenon stood in marbled glory on the Acropolis, symbol of our democracy, our art, our philosophy.

I thought of Socrates, the gadfly on the rump of our state, prodding and forcing us to think, to reason, to tame our fears and hatreds. I worried for him and for our democracy.

I went with Callita and the farmer, shared some wine, then hurried home through the dark and sad streets of Athens to Selkine and my son. ♣

REEL CRIME

J. RENTILLY

Here's the name you probably know: Irwin Maurice Fletcher. He's a journalist and a straight arrow (hence his name), who is possessed of irrepressible charm, wit, and a mind capable of cartwheeling through the most labyrinthine murder mystery, conspiracy, or grift. He was played by Chevy Chase in two popular films of

the 1980s. Here's the name you *should* know: Gregory Mcdonald. He's the man who created Fletch in an Edgar-winning series of nine mysteries that have sold over a hundred million copies worldwide. A former *Boston Globe* reporter, five-times nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, Macdonald is a low-key but intellectually rapacious gentleman, who now lives on a working farm in Tennessee. Mcdonald also penned the equally delicious *Flynn* mystery series, as well as critically heralded "mainstream" fiction, such as *Exits and Entrances* (1988) and *The Brave* (1991). Yet Mcdonald, largely by

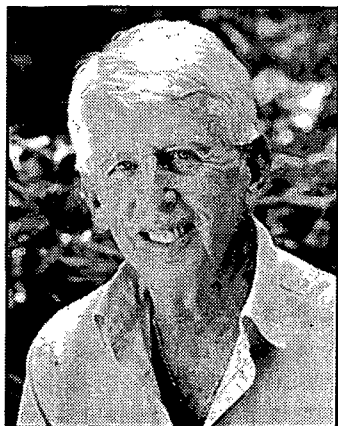


Photo courtesy of Vintage/Random House

choice, has remained elusive, avoiding the limelight and allowing his unforgettable characters to do the talking for him. And talk they do.

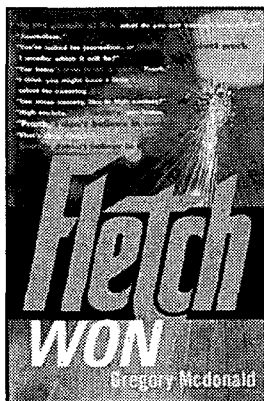
This spring, a new installment of Fletch will go into production as a major motion picture: *Fletch Won* (1985) was one of the last Fletch books, but it told the origin of the character.

In a rare interview, Mcdonald, 71, discusses the joys and agonies of writing, the ups and downs of success, and his (mis)adventures in Hollywood.

Tell me why you wanted to write and how you started out.

I don't understand people who want to write. It's like taking your SATs every day of your life. I tried my first short story at eight, two con men trying to out-con each other. By 16, I was drafting *Exits and Entrances*. Years between, I wrote what seems like millions of

words, experimenting, trying to do without punctuation, etc., trying carpentry without nails and screws, discovering for myself their necessity. I love to make words dance. I want you to hear with your eyes. The compulsion, at least in my case, may be, I find experience so interesting I want to share it with the world.



Between the publication of your first novel, *Running Scared* (1964), and *Fletch* (1974), you served as a journalist in Boston. Why the time between books? How did your newspaper experience inform the subsequent books?

Seven years as a journalist because we were married, making babies, [and] I needed the weekly paycheck. Also, the public reaction to my first novel, *Running Scared*, written at age 23, was truly frightening. Once, after the book was published, a man who had every reason to talk to me refused to do so. Later, a mutual friend told me this man had said that after writing *Running Scared* I should have retired to the mountains and never written anything again. Journalism, I think, caused me to make my work more accessible. Also, as newspaper print got bigger, my column got shorter, maybe making me more concise.

What's the difference between being a journalist and being a novelist?

As a journalist, writer, editor, everything seen or heard, you have to sniff: Is it a story? You have to develop 10, 20 ideas a week. In this way, being a novelist is easier; you develop only a few ideas a year, maybe over 50 years. Few make the transition successfully. Thankfully, I was a successful novelist before I was a journalist.

The *Fletch* books continue to sell a million copies a year. How does this kind of success affect and influence one's life and one's writing process?

Walking some sidewalk—New York, Rio, London, Paris—always working Chapter 17, I notice people hesitating, looking at me, as if wanting to say hello. "Oh, yeah. I'm Greg McDonald." By the corner, my head is back working out Chapter 17. As a journalist, and for as long as possible as a novelist, I tried my best to suppress pictures of me. I want the person sitting next to me on the bus to talk with me. Too, there is the peculiar way I write: point my finger and then get myself out of the scene. (Some make the comment that as a result, people know the names of my characters,



but not the name of their author. Good.) Always, I have been more motivated by getting people to stop hitting each other over the head than by money or fame. All I've asked is freedom to continue writing. What have I most hated? When mobbed, these women who insist on outmaneuvering me to kiss me on the lips, scratch my neck with fingernails. Some kind of game, I guess. Happened many times. Only times I ever wanted to hit a woman.

Why do you think your non-mystery books like *The Brave* or *A World Too Wide* didn't connect with the same vast readership? How do your publishers respond when Mr. McDonald wants to "get serious" and write a non-mystery novel?

Famously, with millions of books sold worldwide, I accepted a \$10 advance from a small, brave publisher for my hugely praised (but non-mystery) novel, *Safekeeping*. Red-faced, my mystery editor screamed at me in his office for all the world to hear. I was "ruining my image." We were never as good friends after that. I had rejected writing under two or more names. I know the wide variety of my work has confused everybody. At least Americans love images as cartoons, so much easier, the football player, the actress, the author. I had to decide there is only one Greg McDonald. I hope history will straighten out context.

One of the marvelous things about your mystery novels is that your heroes are men of action, yet there is a breezy brilliance and a charming irreverence to Fletch and Flynn, who always solve their problems with cunning, not fisticuffs.

I'm pleased to be called "The Master of the Sunlight Mystery." At least there has been that much criticism. To quote Fletch, "We're all mysteries awaiting solution." Or Flynn: "We're all histories awaiting execution." The only question resolved by violence is who is the stronger—not the height of intelligence, interest, or value. A violent resolution mostly impedes understanding.

It's been almost 20 years since the last Fletch film. The last few years have been rich with rumors and speculation. What developments, film-wise, have particularly piqued your interest, and what's the latest information?

People who really love the Fletch books insist on telling me how much they hate the Chevy Chase Fletch movies. I don't know. Two famous filmmakers, nameless here, recently aligned to the new Fletch movies said the identical thing to me over the phone: "Your dialogue is so great all I have to do is underline, hand books to the cast, and start filming." They were serious. Both failed utterly after

huge wastes of time and money. Simple is not easy. Simplicity is the hardest achievement in both life and art. I met a man once who had read in a magazine it took three hours, forty-five minutes to read some book of mine. He seriously asked, "Is that as long as it takes you to write a book?"

What have your experiences in Hollywood been like?

Every time I have flown out of Los Angeles I've been happy with thoughts of all the good stuff about to happen. At 30,000 feet I always remember I just left the City of Illusion. Johnny Depp, as screenwriter, director, actor made an incredible mess out of *The Brave*. Only help he accepted was from his friend, Marlon Brando, who contributed considerably to the perfect mess. I understand discs of this movie do exist. Often people come by with plans to mess up *Safekeeping*, the Flynn books, others of my novels, for which I always express gratitude. But there's nothing going right now except the Fletch movie, which Harvey Weinstein assures me will be in production this spring. That's all I know about that.

By your own estimation, the Fletch series is a "quest for identity."

What are your thoughts on this?

Yes, the last Fletch novel I wrote, *Fletch, Too* (1986), pretty much resolves Fletch's character—his moral experience, components. Story over, don't you think?

WHO WILL BE THE NEXT FLETCH?

Rumors abound as to who will next pick up Fletch's notebook and play the sharp-tongued, cool-knuckled journalist. When *Clerks* director Kevin Smith was attached to write and direct *Fletch Won*, he was keen on bringing along one of his regular players, Jason Lee. Matthew Perry and John Cusack reportedly actively campaigned for a role in the project. When Smith's deal collapsed, in stepped *Scrubs* creator and producer Bill Lawrence, who wanted *Scrubs* frontman Zach Braff to play the journalist. With production tentatively scheduled to begin in May, *Grosse Pointe Blank* writer Steve Pink is behind the cameras, with John Krasinski of *The Office* in talks to play I. M. Fletcher. Until "action" is called, though, it's still a mystery.



Chevy Chase as Fletch
Photo courtesy of Universal
Home Entertainment

SOLDIERS

MIKE WIECEK

Asya Zhenyovna Raimov heard about the dead boy from her friend Vera that evening. Or late afternoon, really, but in January's bitter cold, the broken streets dark during another of Vladivostok's frequent power cuts, it might have been midnight. After her long trudge from the bus stop, Asya's thoughts were as stiff and frozen as the muscles in her face.

"You killed some insects?" she said, confused, stooping to lower a worn sack onto the ground in front of Vera's kiosk. Her hands were numb, and she pushed them through the latched window, mittens and all, for the warmth from Vera's kerosene heater.

"No, no. Zhuk—you know, the kid, he's always on the street." Vera frowned. "I don't know his real name."

"Oh." Asya caught up. Zhuk was a nickname—the Bug—for one of the thin, ragged boys who always seemed to be scrapping among the refuse heaps. "He's dead?"

"The *militsiya* left not twenty minutes ago." Vera pointed and Asya turned around, seeing a shadowy cluster of people farther down the street. Jumbled heaps of dirty ice glistened, chipped off the roads throughout the winter. The only light came from a few windows: the faint glow of candles, here and there a benzene lamp.

The wind abated, and she heard a shout, some muffled laughter. Asya's eyes were old and the street was black, but she knew the men were passing a bottle, just like she knew there were no women among them. Women had more sense; they were inside, cutting up onions in the freezing dark, grumbling at their children.

"What happened?" she asked.

"A horror," said Vera, leaning forward, "an utter horror. No one could recognize him. They made the identification from his shoes—everything else was cut to bloody rags."

Vera, who'd been thirty-nine for at least a decade, knew everyone in the neighborhood. She sat twelve hours a day in her kiosk, surrounded by beer, oil filters, plastic icons, bars of gray soap, a tray of hardboiled eggs, dented butane canisters, a display of costume



jewelry. Gossip was her only entertainment. A murder so grisly would keep her going for days.

"Who did it?" Asya asked.

Vera lowered her voice. "Pyotr Stepanich, they're saying."

Asya was fifty-eight years old; born before Stalin died; she'd been thirty, married and widowed, before she ever heard of *pere-stroika*. She knew how to hide her reactions, how to keep her face clear of any expression, no matter the emotion inside.

"Really?" she said.

"It's no surprise." Vera frowned. "I never understood how you could talk to him. Sitting around drinking all day, and after what he did in Chechnya—"

"He doesn't drink," said Asya. "Not any more."

She'd seen him that morning, in fact, in the street as she left for the long trek to the city market. Pervomaisky, their district, had its own market, of course, but prices were higher enough to justify the bus fare downtown. The waste of time didn't count. Sometimes Asya went as far as Ussurysk, hoping for cheap Chinese textiles or crockery she could resell for a few rubles profit. Today she'd only found a pair of cabbages, hardly black on the outer leaves. They'd do for Borka's supper tomorrow . . .

She didn't want to focus on Vera's lurid story.

"Pyotr and the others in Chechnya, they were madmen," Vera continued. "Not even regular soldiers. *Kontraktniki*. Killing and looting and raping and worse. It was only a question of time before he did something like this."

A light snow began to fall, feathery in the darkness beyond the kiosk.

"I have to go," Asya said.

But as she stooped for her cabbages, a man appeared and picked up the bag, handing it to her with a grunt.

"Here you are, Asya Zhenyovna," he said.

Asya straightened. "Comrade Tolik."

The address was ironic. Tolik was local *mafiya*, idolized by the street boys, tall and rangy and, unusually, in possession of all his teeth. As Vera's *krysha*—roof—he provided nominal protection, less from other criminals than from the notoriously grasping police. Asya tolerated him, impassively, as she tolerated so many other annoyances in the New Russia.

"Shopping today?" he asked.

"Borka comes tomorrow." And despite herself, despite all the disappointments, Asya still felt a quiver of pride as she mentioned her son, who had found a secure job in the Vladivostok city administration, who had succumbed to neither dissolute apathy

nor the garish allure of men like Tolik.

"Of course." Tolik, his childhood friend, understood the implied comparison. "Boris Mikhailovich, the dutiful son." But his flare of disdain faded back into irritation, and he dismissed her. "Go home, *babulya*."

Asya had lived in Vladivostok nearly forty years, arriving as the young bride of her sailor, Mikhail, who'd been posted to the Pacific Fleet straight out of the academy. At home during Mikhail's long sea tours, she'd become friends with the other wives and mothers, had watched their own children grow into adults. The three boys, born into similar circumstances the same year, had taken such different paths: Pyotr into the lashing violence of the army, Tolik into the *mafya*, and Borka, oh her fragile Borka, by a route she could hardly believe, into the safe harbor of a government sinecure.

Vera broke in. "He was here earlier."

"Borka?" Asya was surprised. "But he is to come for dinner tomorrow."

"Perhaps he was confused about the day. I saw him in a car. He didn't talk to me."

"Wait for him at home, not out here." Tolik became impatient. "The lunatic still wanders the streets. It is not safe."

"Is that not your job?" Asya muttered.

"*Chert poderi!*" Tolik shouted, suddenly angry. "What do you think we are doing? My men, every one of them is out looking for the murderer. We will find him. We will take care of this."

"Go on then," she said, too weary to be frightened of him or the *ubiytsa*, and Tolik turned away.

A gust needled snow into Asya's face. "Good night, Vera," she said around Tolik's leather jacket, and plodded off.

Sometimes the elevator worked, if the power was on, if the vandals hadn't been surfing it, if the maintenance crew had deigned to visit. Asya looked through its motionless door, not really hopeful, and saw a glint on the floor—a frozen sheet of urine. Fine. The stairs then.

She passed no one else all the way to her floor. Down the hallway a few muffled sounds came from behind the doors—shouting, a scratchy radio, banging that could have been a child at play.

When Asya opened her door, she knew immediately, though the room was as dark as ever and it was far too cold to smell anything. She stopped short.

"It's me," came a whisper from the corner, and a shadowy figure flowed forward to ease the door closed behind her. "Pyotr."

"You should not be here." Asya waited for her heart to slow down again, then put her cabbages on the table. She felt over the stove for the matches.

He was only thirty-three, but in the candlelight he looked even more gaunt than usual, like the convicts Asya remembered from childhood—beaten, exhausted men in tattered clothes, on their way to or from the camps in the north.

"They came looking . . ." he said.

Asya sat, wearily, and regarded Pyotr. He'd become an unexpected friend since his return. His father had been in the navy, the same as Asya's husband, and she'd liked his mother. Both of them had died young, though, like her own Mikhail, one reason that Pyotr had ended up in the horror that was Russia's army. When he came back, Asya flinched from the shaved head and tattoos and violent outbursts of anger, but she could still see the child he'd been, and unlike everyone else, she talked with him. With her, he was always calm.

"Did you do it?" she asked. Too direct, perhaps, but she'd long since stopped caring.

He shook his head vehemently. "No! I was . . . out back behind my house, and I heard trucks drive up, fast, and stop, and men were jumping out. So I left."

"They came to arrest you? That's the first you heard?"

"Yes. But it was dark, they didn't know their way."

"Not our police."

"No. The local officers know me, they've been there enough."

Pyotr's squat was a hovel he'd built of rubble, plastic, and rusted sheets of metal. Better than most of the others in their wasteland of icy mud, perhaps, but a hard place to live. By "out back" he meant he was using the slit trench he'd dug before the hard freeze.

"Why are you here?" she asked. "I can do nothing for you."

"It was OMON."

"You're sure?"

"I saw the markings on one truck, in the headlights of the other."

"OMON." Asya shook her head. "I didn't like Zhuk, but he was nobody. Why should the federal militia care?"

Pyotr didn't answer.

"You are in trouble," Asya said. Perhaps she should have been frightened of Pyotr—whatever had happened to Zhuk, Pyotr's unit had done worse in Chechnya. But somehow she'd come to trust him during the months he'd been back, hiding out from society.

If the federals were sending out arrest teams, they'd made up

their minds already. If Pyotr survived being brought into custody, no sure matter, he might not make it through the prosecutorial interrogation, and even if he lasted to trial, a death sentence would surely result.

Asya slumped. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know what you should do."

Eventually she built a coal fire in her stove, a large canister scavenged from a waste heap at the rail yard, cut and rewelded, a pipe extending up and out the window. Pyotr had fashioned it for her with the tools he'd borrowed to assemble his shack.

"Perhaps the real killer will be found," said Asya. "The police will investigate, whatever the federals do."

"For Zhuk? No."

"Still. Such a terrible death, for no reason at all . . . who do you think might have done it?"

"Here? Today?" Pyotr's voice was hoarse, his eyes distant. "Anyone. Anyone at all."

"Tolik, of course. He knows all the lowlifes in Pervomaisky—he's hired most of them, one time or another." Boris Mikhailovich Raimov squinted, affecting a thoughtful pose.

Asya frowned at her son. "That doesn't mean—"

"Perhaps even Tolik himself, *mafya* soldier that he is."

They sat in her apartment in the next day, the thin light of early afternoon illuminating its shabby furnishings. Cabbage simmered on the coal stove, steam burbling from a blackened saucepan. A plastic box of chocolates sat between them on the linoleum table, two wrappers empty—Boris's gift. The "truffles" were locally made, extended by wax and sugar syrup to the point of inedibility.

"Tolik would have no reason to kill a boy like Zhuk," Asya said. But she tried not to lie anymore, especially not to herself, and she had to add, "Not in that manner."

"Sounded like he'd been torn apart by Amur tigers." Boris sipped noisily at his tea.

"You saw him?"

"No, no. From what everyone says."

Asya watched Boris sprawl with studied expansiveness in the wooden chair. He'd always been thin, and she wished it didn't make her sad to see him preen in his painfully cheap suit. The gray-green synthetic was shiny at the knees and elbows, already fraying along the lapel seam. Boris wore it proudly all the same, for it was the uniform of white-collar Vladivostok government, the previous governor having decreed the style to prevent corrupt officials from flashing ostentatiously expensive imported suits.

The governor had promised a second suit of warmer fabric for winter wear, but money ran out, and Boris and his colleagues made do.

"Why did the *militiya* come?" Asya asked.

"Little Zhuk—you didn't know who he was?"

Asya shook her head. "No."

"You must have seen him."

"He was around, with the other boys. They buy spray cans of Atom Kolor from Vera, to sniff out of plastic bags."

"Zhuk was . . ." Boris paused for effect. Asya knew he loved thinking of himself inside the government, knowing secrets. "Zhuk was the son of a brother of the deputy procurator in Frunzensky."

"Really." Asya stirred the soup.

"The brothers fell out, so people say. The wife died or ran off, who knows. Zhuk was always *bychara*. His father couldn't control him."

"But now that he's dead—"

Boris made a short, annoyed shrug. "Who cares what kind of boy he was? You can't murder a procurator's relative and walk away."

"Deputy procurator."

"It's one office, one family."

She served the soup with black bread and thin jam. Music, something with violins and drums, played quietly on the radio; Boris had brought her batteries with the chocolate.

They talked of smaller matters—or rather, Boris talked, repeating the endless gossip that apparently filled his days in the *meriya* government building. Watching him speak, bits of food dribbling unnoticed onto his suit, Asya thought Boris looked twitchy. Unhealthy.

He'd grown distant, her son, over the years. Had she held him too closely after Mikhail died? Cried too much for a young boy to bear? The navy never told her what happened, just gave her the paperboard box of his belongings and her copy of a boilerplate commendation, his name misspelled. Months later another seaman visited, one of Mikhail's mates, to tell a mumbled story of hazing and punishment duty and an assignment on deck during a Bering Sea gale. Asya built stone walls around her heart, the only way she knew to survive. Somehow she had left Borka outside.

"Vera mentioned she saw you yesterday," Asya said.

Boris glanced at her. "Oh, yes, I came by."

A pause.

"I was at the market," Asya said finally.

"I had a car for the day—an appointment in Nakhodka, but it ended early. I thought I might stop."

"I'm sorry to have missed you."

"No matter. We are here today."

Later they sat back from the table and had another of the ersatz chocolates. It was too cold to walk outside, too cold even to sit in the flat's two stuffed chairs, farther from the stove. Boris told more anecdotes of government service, entertaining himself for another half hour while Asya cleared plates and heated a pan of water.

"Do you really think it was Tolik?" she asked, when he was preparing to leave.

"What?"

"The murderer, I mean."

"I don't know." Boris pulled on his overcoat. "The federal investigators, they are asking about Pyotr. Another man of violence."

"You were his friend once."

"And Tolik's." For a moment Boris stood still. "Long ago."

"I remember you, the three of you . . ." Asya didn't continue.

"People change." Boris began looking for his hat. "The world changes."

"I'm sorry, Borka."

He kissed her on the cheek. "I will see you in two weeks," he said.

P yotr came at night again, knocking softly at her door. Asya let him in and he went immediately to the stove, not yet cold.

"How can you come and go?" Asya asked. "With all the police looking for you."

"Those *duraki*? Idiots. If they were serious—but they don't care, not really."

"Zhuk's father was *elita*," said Asya. "Connected. That's why they're still looking."

"I know. I heard."

Asya gestured. "There is water yet, in the kettle, and bread. Some beans."

"You are kind." Pyotr rubbed his face. "You are too kind, Asya Zhenyovna."

They sat. Wind whistled outside, throwing rattles of sleet against the small kitchen window. Asya pulled a blanket around her legs.

"It's not the *menty* making it hard for me now," said Pyotr. He held the teacup gently in his scarred hands. "After all, the police, they like a warm stove too. No, it's Tolik's *bandyuga*."

Asya nodded, but didn't say anything.

"When I first came back, out of the army, I saw Tolik a few times. I wasn't . . . doing well. You remember."

"Yes." Asya sighed. "Vera found it all so exciting, how many brawls you were in. Like she was following a football club. It wasn't until you tore apart the Tokyo that she lost her enthusiasm."

"That dive." Pyotr shook his head slightly, staring into his tea. "But I never drank again, after. There's something about waking up in a holding cell with a concussion and four ribs broken—and a pair of Armenians trying to steal your shoes. The bastard cops just laughed, you know."

"You told me."

"Yes." Pyotr glanced at her. "Anyway, Tolik was okay. He'd stand me a drink, have a word. Once . . . once with Borka, even. We were down near the school, like it was twenty years ago, sharing a smoke. Just talking."

Muffled voices rose in the corridor outside, low angry words. Asya and Pyotr fell silent as they listened to the argument pass down the hall. Only when it had faded away did Pyotr move again, lifting his cup for a sip.

"But after the district governor was replaced, and then the mayor," he said, "I don't know, all of a sudden nobody knows who's up, who's down. Tolik, he must think he has to prove himself somehow. The *menty* crack down, he cracks down. The skinheads beat some Chinese *kosoglazyi* half to death, Tolik puts two more in the hospital."

"Skinheads?"

"What?" Pyotr frowned. "No, of course not. Chinese."

The benzene lamp sputtered and hissed, running low. Asya stood to set a candle before they were left in darkness.

"He's not keeping order, that I've noticed," she said. "Hooligans and wastrels."

"He tries, Tolik does." Pyotr slowly chewed his beans. "It's not a good time for anyone."

"No."

"His soldiers are out. Prowling, asking around."

"I know."

"Really?" But when she didn't answer, Pyotr shrugged. "I can avoid them easily enough."

"They want to find you first. Tolik told me. I saw him on the street. As you say, he wants credit with the police—or maybe they ordered him to help."

Pyotr just grunted. Outside the wind blew harder.

"Where are you sleeping?" Asya asked.

"Last night, down back of Turmenov's shop—a little heat leaks out from his furnace. Tonight, someplace else. I keep moving."

"I'm sorry I can't—"

"Don't be," he said, his voice sharp. "I won't have it. I can take care of myself."

"All right."

Later, Pyotr wrapped himself up again in his army greatcoat, arranging the layers before going again into the cold and wind and sleet. Asya gave him the remaining truffles, still in their gaudy box.

"They're too sweet for me," she said.

Pyotr held the box for a moment, and the briefest of smiles flickered on his face. "Borka, no? He always did like these."

"Take care of yourself," said Asya. "Please."

"As ever." He slipped out, closing the door without a sound.

In the morning, unexpected sunshine. The air was still and clear, so empty that traffic noise could be heard from the freeway two kilometers distant. Down the road a pair of boys shouted, chasing each other around the corner of their apartment block, and Asya wasn't the only pedestrian to look at them and smile. For a moment, you could forget where you were, between the taiga and the winter sea. For a moment, it was spring.

Vera stood outside her kiosk, chipping at sidewalk ice with an iron bar, lifting it and letting the point drop.

"Asya Zhenyovna, is it not a brilliant day?" She stopped and leaned the bar against the wall. "Look at them—you'd think we were in Sochi!"

A half dozen men and women, middle aged, stood in the lee of a brick wall across the road, protected from the wind. They held their faces to the sun. One had a reflective sheet of foil; three had opened their coats and shirts, down to their underwear.

"It's a rare chance," said Asya.

"Not just for them. I've sold two bottles of Krasniy Oktyabr perfume this morning, and one of Italian cologne. Something's in the air."

"That would be daylight," Asya said. "Italian? Really?"

"Surely the Korean who sold it to me wouldn't lie."

"Of course not."

Asya looked down to the crime scene, two hundred meters along. An armored OMON *korobok* stood in the street, though no officers were visible.

"They came back this morning," Vera said. "Two police trucks and a *migalki*."

"The car—official?"

"Who knows?" The flashing blue lights, which allowed drivers to drive as fast and recklessly as they liked, had once been intended

solely for government vehicles. Russia being Russia, they'd quickly slipped onto the black market, a status symbol for the wealthy and powerful.

Asya saw Vera look away. "What is it?"

Vera hesitated. "I shouldn't . . ."

"Yes?"

"Boris Mikhailovich. He was there. In the car."

Suddenly it was no longer a day of sunshine and promise for Asya.

"With some other men in suits and coats," Vera said.

"Was he . . ." Asya couldn't face the possibility directly. "They were *militsiya*?"

"Oh, no, Boris wasn't arrested or anything," said Vera hastily. "He was helping, I would say. What I could see."

"Helping," Asya said bleakly. "Naturally. He is a good citizen of the *krai*."

"If I may ask, what is it exactly that Boris Mikhailovich does in his office?"

"Second Assistant to the Controller of the Services Administration. A soldier of the bureaucracy." She ghosted a smile. "I don't know either."

"Hmm." The implication hung between them: that Boris was connected to the security forces.

There was nothing to say.

"The government has been upside down since the mayor was dismissed by Moscow." Asya finally spoke. "It's a wonder anything gets done."

Vera looked around: at the uncollected trash frozen into ugly heaps; at the blank windows of the dilapidated apartment blocks, at the pitted street rucked with ice. "Little enough is done at the best of times," she said.

"*Eto sud'ba*," said Asya. "It can't be helped. Are they still here?"

"No. One truck and the *migalki* left. Some guards remained, but they went off as soon as the others were gone—looking for a warm room, I'm sure."

Asya raised her face to the sky, eyes closed, like the sunbathers behind her, but an arctic breeze drifted in and she felt little warmth.

"Enjoy the day," she said. "Business should be good."

Vera picked up the iron bar. "He'll return, Asya. He'll come to see you."

"Yes." Asya resettled her scarf. "He is a good son."

Halfway down the hill she met Tolik, who emerged from a shuttered building carrying a bucket.

"Good morning, *babushka*." He seemed distracted.

"*Dobroe utro, synok*." She glanced at the dented pail. "Your plumbing has broken? Happens often enough, I have to say—"

"My dogs," he interrupted.

"Oh." Tolik's *volkodavi* were thick-headed Siberian wolf-dogs, fifty kilos of muscle and teeth and fury. "They are well?"

Tolik frowned at her, unsure whether she was provoking him. "Undeclared in the ring, though one lost an ear in his last match."

Asya shook her head. "Two boys could live on what one of them eats every day."

"Maybe I could just feed them the boys," he snapped. "Where are you going?"

"The *christianskii* soup kitchen, in fact." She held his gaze. "I'm hungry."

"The dutiful son should take better care of you."

Barking and growls sounded from inside the building. A young man walking past startled at the noise, glanced at Tolik, and hastily crossed the street.

"He was your friend," said Asya, wearily. "Not so many years ago. What happened?"

Tolik looked away. He swung the bucket a little, and Asya remembered him and Borka as schoolboys, the two of them carrying their strapped books through the door, laughing.

"I don't know," he said. "When we were little, it just . . . nothing came out like we expected."

"Yes." Asya nodded. "That, I understand."

"My dogs. You know what I like about them?"

"They kill other dogs?"

He glared. "Of course not. What I like is, they're honest. They're hungry, they tell you. Put them in the ring and they fight. They're tired, they go to sleep. Nothing is complicated for a dog."

"Then perhaps you should spend more time with them." Asya considered. "Or less. I'm not sure."

"Dogs are better than people."

Clouds drifted across the sun. The breeze picked up, knifing through Asya's padded coat.

"You are a philosopher, Comrade Tolik," she said. "But now the dialectic must wait. Lines at the *nochlezhka* are long, and they do not always have enough for everyone."

"Of course." Tolik straightened up. "When Boris comes again, tell him . . ." His voice faded.

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

"Go and see Vera," said Asya. "Someone should help her clear the ice."

Close to her destination Asya saw the OMON van Vera had mentioned, distinguished from local police vehicles by new tires and fewer dings. Paramilitaries in combat gear walked alongside the truck as it drove slowly down the street. They glanced at Asya, then back at the roofs and doors and windows as they passed. Other pedestrians had disappeared.

"Planning to solve a crime today, are you?" Asya said.

The senior officer, the only one with insignia, stopped long enough to examine her more thoroughly, then shrugged in dismissal.

"Not your business, old woman," he said. "On your way, now." She watched them continue around the corner.

The soup kitchen occupied one of the old workers' canteens, a gray brick building built fifty years before. It closed during the collapse of the state under Yeltsin, reopened as a private cafe, saw brief life as a nightclub, and was finally taken over by a domestic evangelical association. The dim hall was unheated, with a pair of volunteers dishing potatoes and vegetable broth from vats on a wood stove. Every seat was taken, by pensioners mostly, in drab winter coats they didn't remove. Over the slow clatter of metal plates, men talked with men, women with women, in a neighborly way. It wasn't so different from Soviet times.

Asya received the last bowl and a slice of bread. As she stood, looking over the plank tables for a seat, shouting and banging rose from the back room.

"*Negodyai!* What are you doing here?"

The door to the kitchen burst open, and a tall, ragged figure ducked through. He looked around wildly, then vaulted the serving table like a gymnast, one handed.

It was Pyotr. His boots slammed to the floor as he landed, and Asya, shocked, dropped her bowl.

"Pyotr Stepanich—*Bozhe moi*, what is happening?"

One of the cooks, a broad woman in numerous layers of wool and a stained apron, emerged in hot pursuit. "He was sleeping in the coal bin—he must have snuck in through the chute. Out, you *podlec!*"

"No, no." He seemed confused and angry. "No!"

A man nearby abandoned his seat, knocking over the chair. Two women collided and fell. Noise and shouting rose.

The cook stepped up, still furious. "You are not allowed in here—stealing our food. Get out!"

Pyotr straightened, his face going hard. Asya saw a flash from his hand—a knife. She took a step toward him.

Screaming. The cook, suddenly afraid, backpedaled, even as Pyotr lunged with the blade. He missed, reversed, and thrust again, but Asya caught his arm, just for a moment, long enough to divert the cut. She stared for an instant into his eyes, which had gone mad. He roared, no longer human, and slapped back at her. Asya fell to the floor, tangled in her coat, unable to see or escape.

She heard the front door slam open and men shouting and a second later the earbreaking explosions of gunfire all around. Her world went black.

"It was the cook's knife—he grabbed it from the board." Boris held Asya in an awkward hug, sitting with her on the floor. She was still crying. "Lucky the OMON unit was outside."

Uniformed men filled the dining hall. Others in dark civilian coats had begun to arrive. Asya's hearing was dim, with echoes. She thought she could still smell blood and cordite.

"I saw him," she said. "Jump over. He could have taken it then . . . so fast."

"They didn't have a choice. He ran at them—"

"I know." Asya wiped her eyes. "I know. He didn't even recognize me. He looked right at me, and there was nothing in his eyes. Nothing."

"Chechnya," Boris said. "It destroyed him."

"He was the murderer." Asya felt her tears begin again. "I don't think he even knew Zhuk."

"Yes." Boris sighed. "Just random violence."

"All along . . ."

"I'm sorry."

A crowd had formed outside, faces peering through the windows, a cluster at the doorway despite annoyed shoves from the police. Asya looked over and saw Vera, eyes bright—she'd have gossip for weeks, now. Next to her stood Tolik, his face grim. He caught Asya's eye and nodded once.

"I didn't want to think it was him," Asya whispered. "I couldn't."

"I know."

"Everything has gone for the worse in this world—everything. I couldn't let him go too."

"*Ne volnuytes*," said Boris. "It will be all right."

She didn't reply. Soldiers came and went. The floor was cold and hard beneath them. ♣

BLACK WATER, BAD HEART

JODI TAMARA HARRISON

“T here is a baby in the river.”

The old woman turned from the bottles she was filling to see her skinny great-grandson silhouetted in the bright sunlight of the doorway. She wiped her hands on her apron and went to the door.

“What are you talking about?” she asked. Dancer was shaking with suppressed emotion and shifting from foot to foot, his big eyes round in his small brown face.

“There’s a baby in the river,” he repeated. The old woman stepped outside and shut the door, her sharp black eyes studying his face. Summer lay in hot layers on the dirt yard, the ripe yellow grass, the watching mountains.

“Show me,” she said.

He led her at her slow but steady pace down to the river bank and then to the underside of the Charlo Bridge. In the coolness of the bridge’s shadow, he pointed solemnly down into the circling eddies. His great-grandmother, whom the whites called Old Corrie, had thought he was mistaken, that he had taken a rag or a piece of trash to be something other than what it was. But she could see with her own eyes that he was right. There was a baby in the river, face-down and slowly turning in circles in the glassy black water. She looked at Dancer; he stared at it, paralyzed with curiosity and dread. She realized there was no way that he would bring the baby out. Grimly, she slipped off her shoes and tied her skirts up between her wrinkled legs. She sat down slowly, scooted down the bank, and waded in until she could reach a tiny arm and pull the child out. As she turned the forlorn little body to rest upright in her hands, she saw the water run from its eyes as if it were weeping. It was a newborn boy, umbilical cord still attached. In that moment, Corrie heard in the rustling poplars the faint echo of a baby crying, and she knew the baby’s spirit was still in the water.

Corrie had little use for white men, except to sell them quart jars of medicinal liquor or to make them salves for healing. They knew she was a medicine woman, but they called her the old squaw, crazy, or worse. She had less use for the white man's law. Her "medicines," both the true herbal cures and the liquor, helped support her large family and their tiny, scratch-gravel farm, but she knew the liquor could get her in trouble because of Prohibition. To her mind, the fact that the sheriff took two quarts a week made no difference. But there was no choice but to send for the sheriff now; the baby was white. She would take it back to her house and send Dancer to the mission. The sheriff would come and take the small body away, and that would be the end of it for her and her family.

But it wasn't the end of it. The baby's spirit was still in the river. It rustled the trees and danced with an eerie light on the water at sunset. To feel the brush of such a spirit passing was deeply unsettling, and it was not white people who felt this. It was her grandsons, who went to the river to fish, and her great-grandchildren, who swam there or collected berries along the river bank. Over a quiet dinner, she heard how the fish were not biting and how the children did not like to go near the bridge, even to cross it on the way to the mission.

That evening, Corrie went back down to the riverbank. Standing again in the shallows, she sang an old song of calling. She felt the baby spirit hovering out over the river, confused and simple. It had no sense of past or future, and no idea that it should be anywhere other than where it was. Yet it was lost, misplaced and lonely, and the entire river was dislocated by its continued presence. Corrie called and called, in every song she knew, but she knew no English songs, or even many English words of comfort, and this white baby spirit would not come to her. She sighed. There was no help for it; she would have to find the baby's mother.

Corrie did not think this would be difficult to do. She knew that it might be the mother herself who had thrown the baby in the water, but she also believed that motherhood could not be sloughed off so easily. She had lost babies herself, and grandchildren as well, and she knew their imprint could not be taken off like a shawl, not even if the child had never drawn a breath.

"Dancer," she told her great-grandson, "I am taking my sewing to the river to do." The boy looked askance but asked no questions. He was a boy who saw everything but rarely spoke, qualities she believed invaluable in a world where an Indian must always make

a watchful way. Dancer carried her basket of work and a lunch pail, and then helped her sit down in the shade under the Charlo Bridge. He would have sat beside her on the river bank through the long days, but she sent him home to tend the animals and do his chores. Periodically trucks and cars came around the curve to rattle over the bridge and faces turned to her with curiosity, but Corrie paid them no mind. At dusk each day Dancer came back and helped her home.

On the fourth day, the white girl came. Corrie knew her by sight only. Her father was a drunkard who could barely maintain the small allotment he had bought from an Indian seeking to leave the reservation. He lived in an old cabin in the foothills above the mission, with three young daughters and no wife. The girls were skinny and dirty, but with hair the color of a bright new penny, a color Corrie found as strange as it was beautiful. This one, who looked to be about fourteen, was the oldest. The father once sent the younger two to Corrie to buy liquor, but she had pretended not to know what they wanted until they went away again. Corrie did not sell her medicine to just anyone, especially not to a drunk fool with no more sense than to send his children to fetch it. Now, the oldest girl paused like a deer when she saw Corrie sitting on the bank. She hesitated, unsure whether to stay or go. Corrie cast her a glance and then returned to her beadwork. She knew an apprehensive animal would only approach if it was curious, and if one remained very still.

Eventually the girl sat down, near to Corrie but not next to her. She watched Corrie's gnarled hands pulling a needle through cloth, affixing beads to what would be a doll's dress for one of her great-granddaughters. When the time came to load the thread again, Corrie's hands fumbled. This was not done for the girl's benefit. The old woman's hands were arthritic and she found the small beads hard to pick up and harder to pass the needle through.

"I can help you," the girl offered softly. Corrie said nothing but handed her the needle and the small bag of beads. When the girl had strung the thread with beads, she handed it back to Corrie, who nodded her thanks and went back to work. After a while, the girl asked what Corrie was making, and Corrie held up the miniature dress. The girl looked at it solemnly.

"Is it for the baby?" she asked, "The one that died?"

Corrie's hands stilled for a moment before resuming her sewing. "No," she said, "This is for a doll." She paused before asking, "How do you know about the baby?" The girl drew her finger in the dirt and shrugged.

"People talk," she replied simply. She turned her eyes to the water, sparkling in the sun beyond the shade of the bridge. "They found him here, didn't they?" she asked.

"Yes," Corrie said quietly. "I found the baby here." The girl looked up, startled.

"You found him?" she asked. "Where was he?" Corrie pointed down to the eddying water among the marsh grass. The girl hugged her knees and watched the water sadly.

"How'd you know it was a boy?" Corrie asked. Now the girl looked uncertain, perhaps afraid. The old woman handed her the needle and beads again, giving her a task to keep her from bolting.

"I—They said so. At the store." The girl bent her head to string the beads.

"I think you know because that's *your* baby," Corrie said matter-of-factly. "Maybe you can't have a baby, a girl like you. But now you miss him." The girl dropped the beads and thread and jumped to her feet to leave. Corrie watched the beads roll down the bank like colored tears. She didn't turn her head. "He's not gone," she called after the girl.

The girl stopped and turned around.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "He's dead. They put him in the graveyard at the mission."

Corrie nodded. "Dead. But not gone. If you stay until sunset you will feel the baby's spirit rising from the water. You will hear him." The girl was silent for a minute, then she turned and ran away.

Dancer reappeared as the sun was gliding down from the sky to rest behind the mountains. He came to take her home, but Corrie shook her head. "I will stay until dark tonight."

"But Grandmother," Dancer protested. "You could fall in the dark."

"Bring a lantern," Corrie returned. He started to argue, but Corrie fixed him with a look and he fell silent. She sent him home again, telling him not to return until full dark.

The sky was filled with the fire of sunset when the girl returned. She sat back down near Corrie. They sat in silence as the sun settled down. The wind moved through the trees and there it was: the light dancing on the water, the faint crying on the breeze. The old woman felt the girl draw breath. "Don't be afraid," she said. "He needs you to help him." Corrie softly sang an old lullaby as the girl wept silently beside her.

After they sat in silence a while, the girl told her simple story. She had put on weight through the spring; her sisters had teased her about it. One night in the heat of summer, she became very sick. She had never felt so sick and it got worse and worse, until

she was screaming in such pain that her father sent the two younger girls to sleep in the barn. The girl had begged him to send for a doctor, but he said no. She did not know what was wrong until she had felt a great rushing from inside herself, and then the baby was there. She had looked at it, astounded, afraid to touch it. Then her father came in with a towel and, without a word, wrapped it roughly up and took it away. The girl began screaming and crying again, this time in fear and dread, but the father came back and backhanded her across the face. He left again and she lay there in shock, until she realized she had to get up and clean herself. Her father did not come back until dawn, and when he did he was drunk.

"Did you hear the baby cry?" Corrie asked.

"I don't know," the girl said softly, "I was crying enough for both of us."

Her voice was weary, like an old person's. Corrie gently led her to describe her life and to talk about men she might have known in the past long winter. It became clear that the girl had no idea how she became pregnant. She had been at home on the farm all winter long. She knew no boys, was not allowed to go to school. She knew no men except her own father. Corrie tamped down her anger. She did not want to scare the baby spirit or interfere with the way it reached out to its mother. The light danced on the water. The girl watched it and cried anew.

"Is he happy?" she asked.

"I think he is lost," Corrie replied gently. "He doesn't belong here, but he doesn't know how to leave. I tried to show him, but he doesn't know me. He doesn't know my voice."

The girl wiped her eyes and looked at Corrie. She knew what the old woman was saying. "What do I need to do?" she asked.

"Tell him it's all right," said Corrie. "Tell him he can go."

The girl waded into the water and bent to run her hands through it. She murmured words that Corrie could not hear and then ducked her head under the surface. She stood in the shallows until she began to shiver, then she turned and made her way back up the bank. The old woman reached out of herself to the trees and the water. The baby spirit was still there, more excited, more confused. Corrie slowly came to her feet as the dripping girl approached.

"He is still here," Corrie said. "Perhaps he does not understand how to go."

"I didn't want him to go," the girl replied, her face unreadable in the dark. Corrie did not know how to respond. The girl turned and made her way across the bridge, moving like a ghost through the

darkness. Shortly after, Corrie saw a bobbing lantern approaching from the other direction as Dancer came to help her home.

The next afternoon, the night at the bridge seemed like a strange dream to the old woman as she worked in her garden in the hot sunlight. As she harvested beans and checked on her small crop of corn, Corrie turned over in her mind the problem of the baby spirit in the river. Perhaps she could ask Father Dupree from the mission to ask the child to go. Perhaps she could convince her own family the spirit meant no harm. Perhaps the girl would come back and they could try again. She was considering what to do next when she heard the rattle of an engine coming up the road. She slowly stood and shaded her eyes. It was a car she knew well, one with a shape on the side the whites called a star. Corrie made her slow way over to the small porch on the front of the house.

"Good afternoon, Miss Corrie," the sheriff said, taking off his hat. He was always polite to her, the old woman would give him that. Still, she could not trust a white lawman.

"Sheriff," she returned, inclining her head. "You need medicine today?"

"No, not today," he answered. He stepped one foot up on the porch and rested his hat on his knee. "Miss Corrie, I hate to bother you, but something's come up I hope you can help me with."

The old woman waited.

"I had the misfortune to bring another body out of the river this morning," the sheriff said. "It was the oldest Sullivan girl, Beth, I think her name is, that lived up at the old Peedy place." Corrie knew the sheriff was watching her closely. She did not react, not so much as by the twitch of a muscle. Yet her mind was whirling. How could the girl be dead? She gathered herself and focused as she realized the sheriff was still talking.

"Doc Gibbs examined the body. Looks like that little girl was the mother of the baby we pulled out of the river last month." He looked at Corrie again; she remained impassive and silent.

"Seems likely she jumped off the Charlo Bridge," the sheriff said. "Folks have said they've seen you there lately, sitting in the shade by the bank. Seems like a strange place to be resting."

Corrie said nothing. The sheriff sighed. "So, Miss Corrie, I just thought I should ask whether you knew that girl or whether you'd seen her down by the bridge."

Corrie considered her answer carefully. Perhaps someone had seen them together. She knew it was better to tell the truth, so far as she could, than risk being caught in a lie.

"Yes, I saw the girl," she replied. "She came down to the bridge yesterday. We talked awhile."

"Did she seem upset?"

"Yes. But not like she would kill herself." Even as she said this, Corrie wondered if it was true. *Don't be afraid*, Corrie had told the girl. *He needs you*. The old woman glanced at the sky, then the ground. What had she done?

"Did you know she was the baby's mother?"

"I knew," Corrie conceded.

"Her father said he was just shocked, both that she was pregnant and that she'd kill herself," the sheriff said, turning his hat in his hands. "Didn't seem so shocked to me, though." Corrie's eyes must have flickered, because he nodded slowly. "No, he didn't seem surprised at all." Corrie did not reply, and the sheriff put his hat on as if preparing to go. "Anyway, they're burying her down at the mission tomorrow. If you think of anything else she might have said, you let me know." He tipped his hat and walked away, but then stopped and turned around.

"Seems an awfully hard thing, to throw your own baby away," he said. "An awfully hard thing for a woman to do. Do you think a girl would do that, Miss Corrie?"

"Some girl, maybe," Corrie said slowly. "This girl, no." The sheriff nodded and turned again to go.

That evening, Dancer found his great-grandmother standing behind the house, facing the mountains. She draped her black shawl over her head, as she had been taught at the mission, and she raised her hands to the sky. She was singing an old song of mourning. Dancer left her alone.

The next morning found the old woman standing in a line of trees on a hill overlooking the mission churchyard. Even with her old eyes, Corrie could see a moving black mark on the meadow that she knew to be Father Dupree in his cassock, trailed by a short line of people as they wended their way to a freshly dug grave. The few small distant people gathered around the hole in the ground. Corrie saw two penny-colored heads, one on each side of a tall man. The man put an arm around the shoulders of each girl. The old woman turned away. She headed not for home but up into the foothills, and as she walked she searched the ground for a rock the size of her fist.

That afternoon, the old woman searched through her medicine bags. Then she pulled a quart jar of liquor from the small stash she kept in a closet. A few minutes later, she called Dancer in from the garden.

"My son," she said, "take this jar of medicine up to the father of the girl who died. You know where he lives?" Dancer nodded as he reached to take the jar. "Tell him Old Corrie said, 'I am sorry this girl

died and so I give him this as a gift.' "The boy was slipping the jar into a satchel when Corrie added as an afterthought, "Give this gift and message only to the man, not to his daughters." Dancer's eyes searched hers for a moment, then he nodded silently and left.

The next morning, Corrie sent Dancer down to the general store for some sugar. She knew if there was news he would bring it. When he returned, he was breathless as he handed her the paper bag.

"Grandmother!" he said. "The white man is dead. The one I took the medicine to."

Corrie reached for her shawl. "Come," she said.

The old woman made her methodical way up into the foothills until she and the boy were approaching a small farm house. She grasped his arm and they stopped near the fence. There were no cars in the yard and the house was still. They saw no movement, heard no sound, except the gentle swinging and soft creaking of the old screen door.

"You must go in the house," Corrie told Dancer, "And fetch back my jar." Dancer looked at her in alarm.

"What if they catch me?"

"No one will catch you," Corrie assured him. "They have taken the man away, and the girls as well."

"But how will I get in? If they took them all away, the door is probably locked."

"The kitchen is in back," Corrie said. "One pane in the window is broken. You can reach in and undo the latch. Climb in, go get the jar, and come back here to me." Dancer hesitated, but Corrie turned him around and gave him a gentle shove. "Go, my son." He crawled through the fence and ran quickly around the house. Corrie waited, holding her breath. She had assured the boy he would not get caught, but she could not be sure. If some one approached, what would she say? She could not even think of a lie.

She felt faint with relief to see Dancer reappear from around the house, though she did not show that to him. Corrie patted his arm, then took the jar and wrapped it in her shawl. They turned away and started for home. They were still in the foothills when the old woman left the path and walked into the trees. She found a rocky patch and paused. Unwinding her shawl, she took out the jar and threw it to the ground, smashing it on the rocks. Then she turned back to the path, the boy trailing behind her.

The old woman was directing Dancer in stacking firewood on the porch when the sheriff returned the next day.

"Miss Corrie," he said, again tipping his hat. She nodded her

head and waited. "I just thought you'd like to know that Caleb Sullivan was found dead in his bed yesterday morning." The old woman said nothing.

"Perhaps he had a bad heart," the sheriff offered. Corrie did not understand this to be a medical diagnosis, and she was surprised the sheriff was so perceptive.

"Yes," she agreed. "He had a very bad heart." The sheriff looked at her thoughtfully before resuming.

"The thing is, Miss Corrie, when we went up to fetch the body yesterday, I could have sworn there was a jar of your, ah, medicine, next to Sullivan's bed. But when I went back today to look around, it was gone." The sheriff looked at her inquiringly, but Corrie shook her head. She could feel her great-grandson standing very still behind her.

"I never sold my medicine to that man," she said.

The sheriff waited, but she said nothing more. He started to speak again, then shook his head. "Guess I was mistaken."

"What will happen to those girls?" Corrie could not stop herself from asking. The sheriff pushed his hat back and scratched his head.

"I don't know for sure, but I guess they'll be sent to the orphanage in Twin Bridges," he said.

"Orphanage?" asked Corrie. She did not know this word.

"Like a school," the sheriff clarified. "But far away from here."

Corrie said nothing. They had the mission school here, but many other Indian children were sent to schools far away from their homes. They came back with pain in their eyes. For the sake of those little girls, she hoped the whites sent white children to better schools than those where they sent the children of the tribes. Surely the girls would be better off there than here with such a father?

The sheriff tipped his hat and turned back to his car. Corrie watched him drive away and then turned to Dancer. "Let's go back to the river."

She leaned heavily on Dancer's arm as they made their slow way back to the Charlo Bridge. The old woman was tired. She felt worn out, body and soul. This will be my last winter, she thought. This did not trouble her much. Corrie and Dancer sat side by side on the river bank in the setting sun. She reached out again for the spirit of the baby, but the light was just light and the wind was just wind. The baby spirit was gone, leaving only a small and passing sadness. ♡

I, SAID THE SPARROW

“Are you a toxophilite?” asked young Thackeray.

“No, Church of England,” said Sergeant Beef quickly as he bisected a large pickled onion.

The CID man sighed.

“I mean, are you any good with a bow and arrow?”

“You trying to be funny?” asked Sergeant Beef. “It’s not that long since I retired from the Force.”

Thackeray, who had once served as a constable under Beef, knew him well enough to show no impatience. “I asked because I’m investigating this murder out at Tryfford. You must have read about it. Man shot dead with an arrow.”

“Let’s hear the details,” said Sergeant Beef, unable to keep the eager gleam from his eyes.

Thackeray had got what he wanted.

“Certainly. Ledwick Jayne was the president of Robin Hood Club of Toxophilites which used to meet at his house once a year for their championship competition. A rich man, Jayne, a widower with one son. This son is a keen-looking type, ex-Army captain, alert and athletic, one of the best archers in the club—if you still call them archers.

“Jayne himself was over 80, a gangling loose-jointed old man. He had a stroke some years ago and it left him not exactly paralysed but stumbling and jerky, with an impediment in his speech and a more or less permanently dropping lower jaw.

“He no longer joined in the archery but never lost his interest in the pastime and made this annual competition a sort of house-party at his great Victorian country house.

“On the night after the finals in which his son Dennis had won the Robin Hood Cup, Ledwick Jayne was standing out on the bal-

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cony of his bedroom at ten o'clock before turning in.

"He had said good-night to brother Raymond, with whom he had drunk a last whisky-and-soda in his study and had gone up to his bed.

"His son, who was several hundred yards away down at the lake, says that he saw him there in the distance, illuminated by his bedroom light behind him. Dennis, the son, thought nothing of it, for his father was a creature of habit.

"All the younger members of the party had gone down to the lake according to a plan made at dinner. It was a very warm night and they decided that it would be fun to go there and perhaps take a boat out. It was near the field in which the competition had been held, and the little pavilion where they kept their bows and arrows was beside it.

"Ledwick's brother tells the rest of the story. He, Raymond Jayne (an accountant who specialises in income-tax claims), had a last whisky after Ledwick had departed. He had to ring for more soda and chatted with Parkins, the manservant, while he drank it.

"Then he went upstairs. His room was next to his brother's, and the window was open. Suddenly he heard the sound of a fall with breaking wood and ran into Ledwick's room to find him lying over a smashed deck chair on his veranda.

"It was not very light out there, and only when he had hauled his brother's body into the room did he see the arrow. It had gone straight through the roof of Ledwick's mouth to his brain. The older man was stone dead."

"Let's hear the rest of the facts," said Beef.

"There aren't many.

"A bow, one of those which had been used by the competitors that day, was found among the bushes across the lawn. The angle of the arrow's entry would be just right if it had been shot from there.

"The suspects are necessarily those of the practised toxophilites who were out there in the grounds at the time of the murder."

"Or those of them who had any motive," put in Beef.

"Well, they all had, more or less, except perhaps a Mr. Newnes Drury. You see, they were relatives. The Toxophilite Club was largely a family affair and Ledwick used to ask all those related to him to stay in the house. The rest put up at the village inn a mile or two away and were all in the bar at the time.

"Down by the lake were Raymond's two sons, Keith and Alec, and a girl friend of Keith's called Nancy Maynard. There was also Ledwick's daughter, Grace.

"I say they are all suspects because Ledwick was a very rich

man, and his will, which I have examined, divides up his fortune in the way you would expect—large shares to his son and daughter, then slightly smaller equal shares to his brother and nephews.

"Any one of them would receive enough money to start him or her in whatever career chosen and Raymond's share would make the rest of his life comfortable.

"The man without any apparent motive, this Newnes Drury, may possibly have had some understanding with Ledwick's daughter, but I can find no evidence of it. So there you are. Six people under 30, all out on the grounds when Ledwick was shot, mostly having a motive, and all expert archers."

"Fingerprints?" asked Beef.

"Gloves are worn by archers, I believe. They were by this one, anyway. The arrow hadn't a print. The bow had been used that afternoon by Dennis and Keith, and there were good prints of each of them. Nothing else."

"No footprints?"

"Rubbed out."

"What was the distance from the point where the murderer was believed to stand to Ledwick's position?"

"About twenty yards."

"Was it, though?" said Beef, for the first time showing animation.

"Twenty yards? That's interesting."

There was a long silence. Then Thackeray picked up his notes.

"I can tell you what each of the young people claims to have been doing at the time. Of course, they've only got one another as witnesses. Keith and his girl friend had taken the punt and pushed out on the lake. . . ."

"Never mind all that," said Beef brusquely. "Have you got someone down at Tryfford now?"

"Yes. Coles is there."

"Can you phone him?"

"I daresay. What do you want to know?"

Beef sat back in his chair.

"There's several things. I ought really to go down myself. I'm getting old and lazy. Still, you tell your chap to get the manservant to the telephone and I'll do the talking."

Beef thoughtfully poured out a glass of beer while Thackeray did as he was asked.

"We're pretty sure that Parkins never went out that night," he said, with his hand over the receiver. "No other servants lived in the house."

Beef nodded, and when at last the manservant was at the

other end asked his questions with great deliberation.

"You remember that night. Did you put the whisky and soda out for Mr. Jaynes and Mr. Raymond? You did? Well, how much whisky was there and how much soda?"

Thackeray, leaning close, could hear the man's metallic-sounding reply.

"The siphon was nearly full. The whisky decanter about a third full."

"And when Mr. Raymond rang? Did you notice?"

"Yes. I took particular notice because I was surprised. The siphon was empty. About half the whisky had gone."

"They like it drowned, did they?"

"No. That struck me as queer at the time. They both liked only a spot of soda."

"Then, when you finally took the tray away?"

"That night, it was. After Mr. Raymond had gone up. The decanter was empty and the new siphon about an inch down."

"You stopped there chatting to Mr. Raymond?"

"I couldn't help it. He kept questioning me about my family and that. I wanted to get back to my fire."

"Thank you, Parkins. You've been most helpful. Are you a toxophilite, by the way?"

"No, sir. I shouldn't know what to do with a bow and arrows."

"Nor should I," laughed Beef and replaced the receiver.

"Well?" Thackeray sounded impatient.

"Clever," said Beef. "Dead clever. You'll have to work hard to get the evidence together if you mean to hang him. I can tell you the murderer. At least, I'm pretty sure of it. But you'll have to get the proof."

"Go on," said Thackeray.

"Why did Raymond ring for Parkins?" Beef asked. "And insist on keeping him talking for ten minutes or more? There had been a full siphon of soda. It couldn't have all been used. Why did he squirt it away so that he had an excuse for getting Parkins up to the study if he didn't want to create an alibi for himself?"

"He knew when Ledwick would be shot, then?"

"He knew when Ledwick would die. Let me ask you another question. Do you think that any man with a bow and arrow, any man, mind you, could shoot another through his open mouth at twenty yards range in half darkness?"

"If you do you've never played darts. You may be able to get a bull once in three darts, but change your length of throw by two feet and you won't get on the board."

"These archers practised on targets, not on deer in Sherwood

Forest. There was not one of them who could even have hit a man's head at an unmeasured range. I saw that at once. Ledwick was not shot from the garden. He was poisoned by his very clever brother.


"All Raymond had to do when he administered his poison in the whisky was to let Ledwick go to bed and keep Parkins in a closed room far away from the bell. He knew that he would not be disturbed for he had heard the young people's plans and was aware that Parkins was the only resident servant.

"So when he had kept Parkins long enough he went up and found his brother neatly stretched out dead. He had his arrow ready and thrust it through the roof of his mouth to the brain so that he could 'find' his brother shot from the shrubbery.

"He had already emptied away the rest of the whisky which contained the poison and washed out the decanter with soda-water. He broke the deck chair with a couple of kicks—a nice touch that.

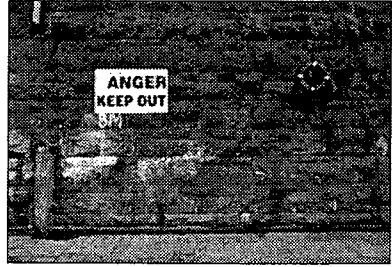
"His alibi was cast-iron. His brother, standing on the balcony with six skilled archers in the grounds, is shot through his notoriously wide open mouth.

"Who's going to suspect poison? The cause of death could never be doubted for a moment, he thought, a cause with which he could have no connection. But you go and get a post-mortem and see if I'm not right. There's something very convincing about a bow and arrow but really, when you come to think of it . . ."

"Exactly," said Thackeray, "when you come to think of it." 

THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Adrian W. Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota. Honorable mentions go to Ben F. Butler of Staten Island, New York; Randy DeWitt of Hudson, New Hampshire; Judith Fawley of Pensacola, Florida; Tony Lewis of Redwater, Texas; James Frank Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Gil Stern of Las Vegas, Nevada; and Norma Weston of Abilene, Texas.



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ANGER MANAGEMENT

ADRIAN W. LUDENS

Officer Brennan grimaced as the smell of patchouli assailed his nostrils.

"Can I help you?" lisped the ponytailed man who answered the door.

"I'm investigating complaints of screaming coming from this building," Officer Brennan announced.

"Oh my!" The man widened his eyes in mock horror. A crystal around his neck glinted in the sun. "I do apologize if anyone has been upset by our scream therapy class."

"Scream therapy?"

"Yes." The lisping man gestured at a hand-painted sign posted on the building's exterior. "The sign may be lighthearted, but here at New Millenium Medicine we offer a variety of serious anger management techniques. One of our most popular classes is scream therapy. Our students learn to use screaming as a therapeutic psychotherapy tool."

Brennan impatiently balled his fists. He had already decided the man was no threat and was eager to be gone.

"Would you like to come in and see one of our classes?" the man offered.

"That won't be necessary," Brennan said, recoiling at the idea of surrounding himself with New Agers. "Just keep the noise down."

"We'll do that, Officer." The ponytailed man smiled and closed the door.

Two weeks later, when the mutilated bodies were discovered in the dumpster behind the building, Brennan was suspended. When the newspapers picked up the story about his halfhearted investigation of the building, Brennan lost his badge.

Brennan had a hard time coping and had to join an anger management class.

THE LINEUP

MITCH ALDERMAN is a three-time finalist for the Shamus Award for his stories featuring Bubba Simms, published in AHMM. His most recent, "No Picnic," appeared in the January/February 2007 issue.

LEO BRUCE was the pseudonym of Rupert Croft-Cooke (1903-1979). He was the author of over thirty detective novels, a number of which have been reissued by Academy Chicago Publishers.

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN is a three-time winner of the Shamus Award. His recent books include the novel *Gas City*, published by Forge, and *Amos Walker's Detroit*, featuring photographs by Monte Nagler and published by Wayne State University Press.

Booked & Printed columnist **ROBERT C. HAHN** reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and the *New York Post*, among other publications.

JODI TAMARA HARRISON's first published story appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

STEPHEN JOHNSTON makes his AHMM debut as the co-author of "Cookies." A resident of The Netherlands, Mr. Johnston is the president of the Short Mystery Fiction Society.

"In Search Of" is **WILL LUDWIGSEN**'s third appearance in AHMM. His last story here was "Bingo" in the May 2004 issue.

MOLLY MACRAE is currently vice president of the Short Mystery Fiction Society. Her first novel, *Wilder Rumors*, was published in 2007 by Five Star.

J. RENTILLY is a Los Angeles-based journalist who covers film, music, and literature for a variety of national and international publications.

"Under Sapparn Put" is **MITHRAN SOMASUNDRUM**'s third story in AHMM; his most recent was "On Soi Arab" (May 2005). He has also been published in several literary journals and is at work on a novel.

"Death in the Keramikos Cemetery" is **MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG**'s eighth story featuring Kleides the Sophist to appear in AHMM. Her most recent appearance in AHMM was "Case Capped" (April 2008).

MIKE WIECEK won the 2006 Shamus Award for his story "Death in Ueno" (AHMM, March 2005). He is the author of the novel *Exit Strategy*.

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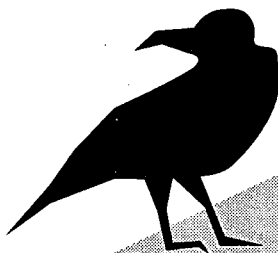
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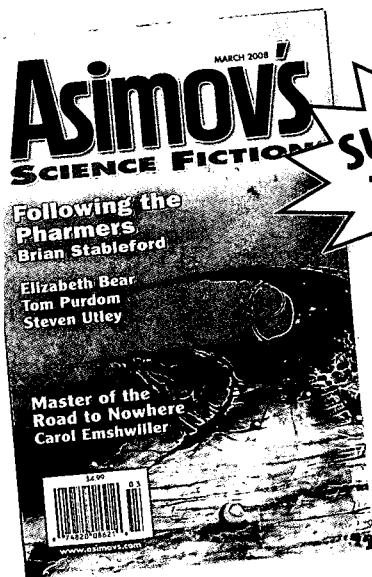
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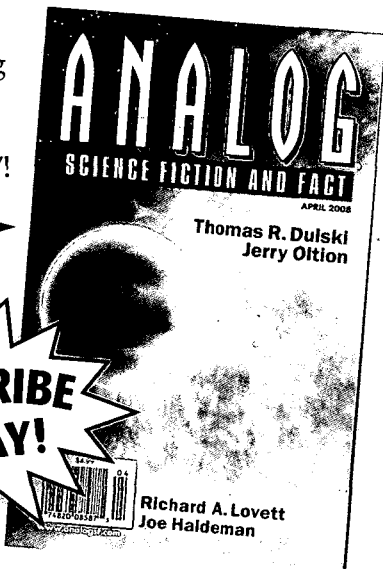
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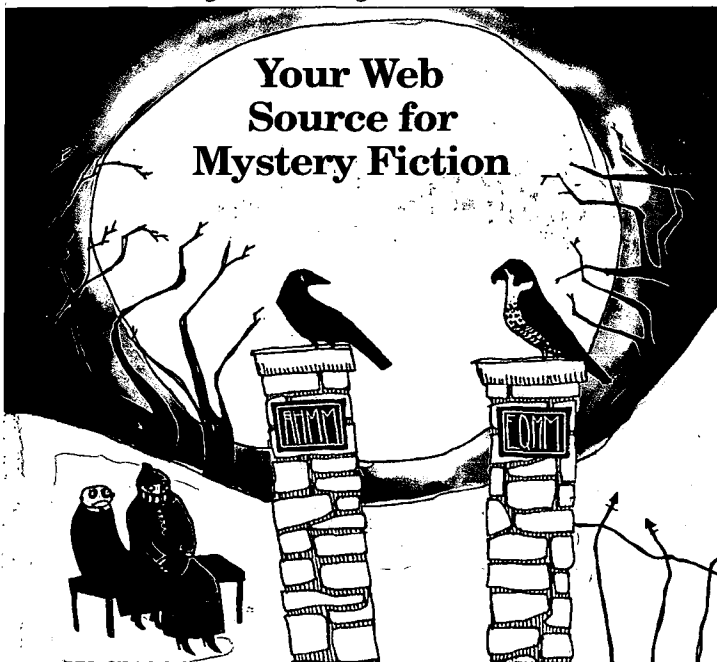
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